

## Two Attacks

'Will she survive?' Dumbledore lifted his eyes to the man standing over him as he crouched next to the body of Hermione Granger. She lay draped over smashed brick, her heart pumping blood out a severed artery to waterfall over the dusty red, staining it a darker hue.

'Headmaster...tell me,' Severus' voice was barely a whisper, it was a question of desperation. Dumbledore raised his head and saw what answer he must give, regardless of the truth. He needed Severus Snape- whole, well and undistracted. He could not afford to worry about this girl now. His long hands were already reaching for her, and Dumbledore could see the crackling white-blue of the bond snapping at his Potions Master's fingers, seething to jump the gap, to heal the badly wounded girl in front of them.

But he was too tired. He could not afford to heal her- especially if she was beyond it. The older man stilled the younger's hands, shaking his head. 'No, Severus, you cannot.'

He sighed, his own wand going to her chest, murmuring spells to heal the hole blasted in her left lung. The blue-white light seemed all the brighter in the darkened alley, and they watched as her tissue began to knit back together, splintered ribs becoming whole.

He nodded, exhaustion extinguishing the light in his blue eyes. 'She will.'

Severus straightened, withdrawing his hands and closed his eyes for just a moment, the tension relaxing around his mouth. Nothing would ease the burning in his chest, the bond that linked him to the girl on the ground flooding her pain into his heart and lungs. He nodded slowly, ignoring it, the Headmaster's reassurance assuaging a much greater fear. Then his eyes snapped open, and his customary cold brilliance echoed in them, the mind-numbing pain that Dumbledore had seen there disappeared, the tautness fleeing his shoulders. Without a second glance at Hermione, Severus strode away, growing fuzzy in the lingering smoke as he sought others.

Fires of all colors cast hell-shaded shadows on the remaining walls of Diagon Alley. Windows were shattered, gaping like open mouths of

jagged teeth. Marble from Gringotts pillars had hurtled from the sky like a deadly rain to shatter glass and break holes in wood, brick and granite walls.

*Diagon Alley...* by the time he knew, it had been too late to divert the attack. Voldemort had wanted it to be a complete surprise. No one had been told. He had called all of his Death Eaters together and Apparated them en masse to the alley. Severus had sent warning as fast as he could....

...but the Death Eaters were profoundly efficient. Even though they were as surprised as the witches and wizards they descended upon, they had instantly organized themselves by cell, coordinating under Avery and Lucius. All of Severus's assassins had Apparated onto roofs and fire escapes, picking their individual targets easily, blasting Muggle-borns, setting fire to stores and killing the Ministry members in the area. It had been all too easy to destroy the unprepared haven in a matter of minutes.

He stepped around blood, lifting bodies, checking pulses. Too many had none. He saw the Weasley clan gathered near the Leaky Cauldron. Mr. Weasley was supporting the dazed and bleeding owner of Flourish and Blotts, Molly was shaking visibly even from this distance, taking a head count as Bill, Charlie and Percy picked through the rubble. He could see the red hair of one of the twins, but he could see the tension in her craning neck: Molly was looking for Ron.

*Good luck to her,* he thought grimly. Weasley had been with Potter. And wherever Potter had been, that was where the fighting had been thickest. What had possessed the Headmaster to bring them into this? To deliberately risk the boy he had struggled for more than five years now to keep safe and out of the Dark Lord's hands? And he knew, looking at the devastation around him that Dumbledore had brought all the fighters he could, in the hopes of keeping innocents safe.

But the fighters included Hermione...

His robe caught, and he turned around. A small, slightly pudgy hand clutched the corner of his cloak.

'Professor...' Severus winced. Neville Longbottom. He gazed at the boy, closed his eyes at the sight of his mangled legs. Even with magic, Neville might be crippled for life.

'Help me?' Neville pleaded, a tongue darting nervously over dry lips.

Severus bent and removed the rubble from the boy's body. A broken arm twisted so grotesquely the bone glistened white through shredded skin, and blood streamed freely from his mouth and a wound near his temple. Severus' mouth dried instantly. Internal bleeding. If Neville didn't get to St. Mungo's now he would die.

He squatted, lifted the boy to Neville's stanching screams of pain-

-and nearly dropped him. His arm seared angrily, and he could feel that the Dark Lord was wondering where he was. He gasped. He had to go-

'Lupin!' he barked.

Remus Lupin spun around in mid-stride. 'Get Longbottom to St. Mungo's. I...have business.'

Remus noticed the way he soothed his left arm when he took the bloodied bundle. 'Good luck, Severus.'

Severus nodded curtly, unable to sneer. As he Disapparated, his mind returned to the image of Hermione's body, broken open, her life's blood feeding the cobblestones. For the first time in many years, he had to master his breathing, and the rage of savage thoughts tearing through his mind as he appeared in the graveyard behind the Riddle House. As his wits returned in their cool, unbreakable fashion, another, more familiar emotion emerged. Revenge smoldered inside him.

He took a deep breath and counted to ten. He could afford no unseemly displays, even while his blood seemed to boil from pain, worry and fear. Personal fear. He swallowed the loathing that rose like vomit in his throat.

That had to wait for later. He ruthlessly turned off all the emotions that had roared to life inside him, feelings that would end his life shortly if Voldemort chanced on them while rooting through his thoughts.

In due time, he would discover and kill whoever had nearly murdered his Hermione.

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Dumbledore felt, rather than saw, Severus Disapparate. He sighed as he cast a quick spell over Hermione. She would not die immediately- but he was too drained to save her himself, his power expended in the battle.

Limbs were strewn everywhere, and he could not look anywhere without seeing blood splattered on the normally cheerful walls or get the stinging smoke from his eyes.

He summoned a Healer from St. Mungo's. The Healer Apparated next to him, looked at Hermione's body and closed his eyes briefly.

'Keep her hospitalized as long as you think necessary,' Dumbledore instructed tiredly. 'She is a Muggle-born student, so it will not be necessary for you to alert her parents as long as she is healing.' The Healer nodded, gently transported Hermione to a stretcher and Disapparated with her.

Dumbledore started towards the middle of the alley. It was near the apothecary's shop that Harry had been ambushed with Ron and Hermione. And if that was the state of Hermione's body...

He saw Ron Weasley rise, pale, his freckles vivid on his sheet-white face, but he was walking, cradling one arm.

'Mr. Weasley!' Dumbledore called. Or tried to. But smoke and screaming spells through over the din of battle caused his voice to crack. He had to hurry over to Ron instead.

'What happened to Harry?' Dumbledore asked urgently. 'Did you see? Is he alive?'

Ron studied his shoes before nerving himself to look into his Headmaster's blue eyes. 'They captured him,' he whispered hoarsely. It was then that Dumbledore noticed the filthy streaks that ran through the dirt and smoke caking Ron's cheeks. 'He was alive, sir, when Walden McNair Disapparated with him.'

Dumbledore swayed on his feet, fatigue flowing from him almost tangibly at this latest news. The Dark Lord had captured Harry. Again. And this time, Voldemort would simply kill him. He did not tend to repeat past mistakes. To bring the boy here...what had possessed him to bring the boy here?

'Albus, you should return to the school,' Minerva was suddenly at his side, her hands steadying him. 'You're too tired to be here.'

Dumbledore shook his head. 'There are many who died here today, and more in the hospital. I need to stay- to help, to know...I am the leader of the Order. I can't leave just because I am also an old man.'

And his age showed in all of him now, the ancient, sorrow-filled eyes, the dust that painted every line of his face in sharp relief, the vein-lined calves exposed where his robe had been ripped.

Minerva bowed her head and hurried to help others, moving rubble. Families found one another- or did not. She felt tears filled her eyelids as she watched a girl of eight reach for a trembling boy of five, both of them clasping hands as they stared at the slashed face of their dead mother.

'Come with me,' she murmured, placing warm hands on their young shoulders. 'I am a Hogwarts teacher. Please, come with me.' The girl gave Minerva a look too sharp for an eight-year-old, and took a long moment to tuck her hand into Minerva's and follow, still holding her younger brother.

Those who had lost family members were gathering near the exit of the Alley, where Ministry officials were beginning to take over. Magic was clearing the street of the heaps of rock and brick, and those Order members still capable were Apparating back to Grimmauld Place.

'Diagon Alley is clear of the living,' Minerva told Albus grimly, wiping dirt away from her mouth.

'I know. The death count is still coming in. And Harry...Harry who I love like a son...'

'Did he die?' Minerva asked suddenly, fear flooding her like ice. 'Albus, quickly, tell me, was he killed?'

'No. At least, not yet. But Voldemort has him. I have failed.'

'As long as he is living, you have not failed,' she told him resolutely. She looked around for the other professor that completed their trio. She did not see him.

'Severus...?'

'Summoned to Voldemort,' Dumbledore said shortly. He shook his head, his eyes darkening. 'He may be getting to be a danger to himself.'

'What? Why?'

'Did you see Hermione Granger?'

'No. Don't tell me she-'

'Her condition was critical when the Healer from St. Mungo's arrived,' Dumbledore told her quietly, his eyes unfocused. 'He looked agonized, Minerva. I have never, in the twenty-five years I have known him, seen him look that way. He would not- could not- work until I promised him she would live.'

'Will she?'

'I think so. I hope so.' Dumbledore took her arm, needing the support it gave him and prepared to Disapparate.

'If she dies...' McGonagall let the question hang.

'I don't know. I don't know whether he can survive without her. We shall have to hope we don't ever find out.'

Perhaps he should have discouraged it instead of simply concealing it and allowing the two to take their course. Perhaps he should have forbidden it.

But he had not. And now there was nothing he could do.

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Dumbledore remembered the first faint stirrings of this peculiar relationship, beginning in the spring last year. Being a Headmaster of Hogwarts, he was tied to the stones of the castle so deeply that he could feel the pulse of the lives of everyone within them.

For privacy reasons, he usually ignored them. But Severus and Hermione had unwittingly provoked his interest, and he had kept an unobtrusive eye on them long before either of them had been aware of it themselves...

But there had been interest long before that, he reflected wryly as the walls of his office solidified around him and his Transfiguration professor. In fact, the girl had unwittingly provoked interest that very first year...

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*June, 1992...*

'You said "cool logic in the face of fire,"' Snape said slowly, turning the words over as he questioned the Headmaster after the Leaving Feast.

'I did,' Dumbledore's eyes sparkled with their maddening delight. 'What of it?'

'The riddle I used to secure the Stone involved fire.'

'Indeed.'

'Did that first-year Gryffindor child defeat my ward?' Nothing short of incredulity echoed in Snape's voice.

‘Indeed she did. She solved the riddle, and sent Harry forward while getting herself back safely.’

‘At twelve...’ the wonder in the Potion Master’s tone caused the Headmaster’s mouth to twitch uncontrollably. The professor had never expressed any interest of any kind in any student...perhaps this child would be the first, a brain he could mentor, tutor and admire...

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But that had been almost four and half years ago. And Severus Snape had done nothing of the kind. Hermione Granger’s friendship with Harry Potter and status as a Gryffindor were irreconcilable barriers to any admiration or willingness to teach that Snape possessed. Instead of the warm, inspirational- he’d even dared hope for a father-daughter feeling- relationship he had imagined developing between their minds, only antipathy grew and overshadowed all they might have shared in common. Severus had derided her where all others heaped praise, causing many an argument in the staff room between himself and Minerva on the subject of Hogwarts’ most intelligent mind in a decade.

And then, last spring had simply...happened. From a solid mutual dislike to a bond that transcended time. Dumbledore rubbed his sooty temples with an equally dirty hand.

Sometimes, he hated magic.

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*Six Months Prior...*

‘Detention, Miss Granger,’ Snape hissed furiously. ‘How many times do I have to tell you that Longbottom is to make his own potions? I don’t believe *you* are qualified to teach this class.’ He surveyed her furious eyes with a smirk.

Hermione bit back the retort that she had simply been trying to save *his* class another melted cauldron disaster and simply glowered at him.



‘Ten points from Gryffindor for your expression, Miss Granger. Get back to work. And if I see you so much as give Longbottom the time, you will have another night’s detention. Have I made myself clear?’

‘Perfectly. Professor,’ she could not keep herself from spitting the title.

‘Insufferable git,’ Ron hissed.

‘Yeah,’ Harry agreed. ‘Hermione, I’m sorry.’

‘What for?’ she snapped, slamming her books into her bag. ‘I’ve never served a Snape detention before, I guess I get to join the ranks.’

‘Yeah, but everyone knows you were just trying to help,’ Ron replied seriously, throwing dirty looks at the back of Snape’s head. ‘It’s not like he’s going to be happy if another potion burns a hole in the floor.’

‘But then Neville would have the detention,’ Harry pointed out.

‘Better me than him. You know how Neville is with Professor Snape. He’s terrified of him,’ Hermione replied. ‘It’ll be fine. I’ll do whatever he tells me and leave as fast as I can.’

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Hermione knocked on his dungeon door at six o’clock that evening.

‘Enter,’ came the sharp voice. Snape sat at his desk, grading papers.

‘These potions,’ he flicked open a cabinet, ‘need sorting and labeling. Get to work. Put the ingredients for the advanced potions on the top shelves. If that’s not too difficult for your fifth-year brain to handle.’

Hermione nodded, and started. They worked in deadly silence, a stillness that promised to explode if either spoke.

Neither did.

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But Hermione could not refuse helping Neville. All Snape had to do was enter the room and he would give her a panic-stricken look, and she couldn't leave him out- especially when he was doing so well with the DA. *Snape be hanged*, she thought, and she continued to quietly mutter the instructions out of the side of her mouth.

He was mostly done, the potion the correct turquoise color, when Snape turned to catch Hermione giving him the last instruction. He could not help but admire her loyalty- and her ability. She was so neat, and Neville, striving desperately to take after her, had similarly ordered his potions on his desk. But, organization and talent aside-

'I thought I told you not to help him, Miss Granger?' he said icily. 'Or did you enjoy detention so much you want another?' He glared at her and she narrowed her eyes at him.

'Since a single night seemed not to teach you not to interfere, perhaps a whole week of detentions? You will start tonight, and your detention times include Saturday and Sunday.'

Hermione set her jaw as she stared at him and said clearly, 'Yes sir.' Anger boiled in her so viciously she wanted to slap him. She wished he were Draco Malfoy and that she dared.

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Saturday marked the third night of detention. Each night had contained a different task, including disemboweling fire salamanders- a thoroughly awful task. She shivered at what he might make her do tonight.

'Come,' he answered as usual.

She entered, her wand stored in her pocket. 'Come with me, Miss Granger,' he ordered. She clenched her teeth and obeyed.

He took her out of his classroom and two doors down to another room, which was bolted. Hermione tensed. Where were they going? All of Moody's, Harry's and Ron's fears about Snape's loyalty rushed to her mind. Was he about to place her in the arms of the Death Eaters?

No. She breathed an audible sigh of relief. It was another dungeon room, with cauldrons simmering over more than a dozen fires. Smoke of six different colors wafted through the room.

Snape stopped to check each potion, and as he looked at them in turn, Hermione caught a look on his face that she had never seen before, or even imagined seeing. He poked, stirred, added ingredients, all with an expression of finally seeing a favorite child whom he had not met in years. There was a quiet alteration of his demeanor, a focused quality. *This is what he loves and wants to do*, she thought with something akin to surprise. Somehow, she had never imagined Snape having passions, even for the cold, sure comforts of the academic world. He always seemed to hate his subject- or at least, the students he taught it to.

‘Errr...professor? What are we doing here?’ she asked quietly.

‘You are going to assist me,’ Snape snapped, the look vanishing instantly, the professor back at work, replacing the academian. ‘Since I have been saddled with your punishment at the same time that I save for research and brewing my own potions, I will use your help.’

Hermione felt a ridiculous urge to smile at this sudden windfall. *It’s Snape*, she reminded herself. *But still...I get to help one of the top professionals brewing his own potions. I can’t pretend that’s not exciting.*

‘What do you want me to do?’ Her eagerness threaded through her voice, and he gave her a look of complete disdain.

‘You are going to copy down what I tell you. If you touch a single cauldron, the word ‘detention’ does not begin to describe what you will suffer. Have I made myself clear, Miss Granger?’

Hermione bowed her head, the faint euphoria of discovery and excitement plunging instead into disappointment.

‘Yes.’

‘Sit. I will dictate to you what I am doing.’ He strode to the biggest cauldron, which was surrounded by smaller ones. Hermione sat at the desk, quill and parchment out.

*Why is he bothering?* she wondered. *He could just bewitch the quill to do it for him...but since this is my detention he probably knew I would rather be working with the potion than writing, so he’s trying to punish me.* She focused on the quill. *I won’t let it work.*

‘Potion 437, Curse Removal Draught, day twenty-four. Control Cauldron: light blue in color, no odor, no smoke, opaque liquid. Variant One: dark blue in color, steam rising, no odor. Additional ingredient- three centiliters of Mandrake containing two milligrams of crushed garnet. Variant Two...’

Hermione kept writing, her head down, not nearly as bored as she had thought she would be. It was midnight before her eyelids started to droop, and she pushed herself to continue through to three o’clock, when suddenly, Snape stopped and stared at her.

‘Miss Granger,’ he said slowly, amazement outweighing the habitual disgust in his voice. ‘You have been here for nine hours.’

‘Yes sir,’ she said, sighing. It was better when he just talked about the potions. Then she could forget it was Snape and just drink the information.

‘Aren’t you tired?’

‘A little sir,’ she admitted, shrugging.

‘Go to bed, Miss Granger.’ Amazement evaporated. ‘If you think serving an extra long detention tonight relieves you of tomorrow, you’re mistaken. Get out.’

She put down the quill and parchment, disappointed that he was going to continue without her, but disobedience was not an option, so she left speedily, his back to her as he tested something new.

He looked after her as the door latched. The eagerness on her face, in her voice when she had looked at his potions, the naked desire to learn...he had not seen someone so quick to love potions in years.

But she had always loved them. Always. From the time her hand first shot into the air on the very first day, bushy hair flying in all directions as she practically leaped to her feet to tell him the answer. Always. Enough to solve a riddle as a first year...almost still a baby.

He shook his head and turned back to the solution, dribbling in the powder still in his hand.

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Sunday, she approached his dungeon with some trepidation and a little excitement. Hopefully, they would work in his potions lab again...

'Those barrels,' he told her, not looking up from his papers, 'the ingredients need to be put in those bottles,' he flicked his wand and hundreds of small bottles appeared before her, 'and added to the potions storeroom.'

She swallowed her displeasure and muttered, 'Yes, Professor Snape,' before starting to work.

'The storeroom is three doors down, Miss Granger,' he handed her the key absentmindedly. 'Put it all in there. Do not think to use magic to carry it,' he warned her. Hermione seethed silently. It would take at least an hour to put all of the little bottles away- and it was already midnight!

'That answer is wrong sir,' she said involuntarily, catching sight of Malfoy's paper as she took the keys. Their hands brushed, and her comment caused him to look down, their fingers still touching, the key in both hands.

'So it is, Miss Granger. But I don't recall,' he let go of the key as his black eyes bored into her, 'allowing students to help me with my grading? Twenty points from Gryffindor. Go finish your job.'

Hermione turned on her heel sharply, ignoring the tingling that seemed to come from her hand where his had lingered.

‘Insufferable git indeed,’ she fumed, carrying the glass bottles several at a time to the storeroom and filing them on the shelves. ‘Just because he wanted to cheat and give Malfoy a better grade...what kind of teacher does that?’ And he always found the smallest errors in her essays to snip at...

‘Have you considered, Miss Granger, that it might have been an honest mistake?’ Snape’s quiet voice stopped her cold as he arched an eyebrow and handed her several bottles to put on the shelf.

‘No, sir. I have never seen you mistakenly grade a paper,’ she answered, trying to fight the embarrassment at being caught criticizing him.

‘Ah. Well- you may want to watch your tongue when the person in question might hear you. Another twenty points from Gryffindor. Hurry up with the last of these, I’m done babysitting for the evening.’

Hermione left in a terrible temper.

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‘He really is a git,’ Ron said wonderingly as Hermione was finishing dinner in preparation for the fifth night’s detention. He seemed to think that Snape had reached an all-time low, even for him. ‘Giving Malfoy a higher grade than he deserves? That lousy, stinking-’

‘I can’t wait to be done. Wednesday is my last one.’

‘Yeah, but we have potions tomorrow. Are you going to leave poor Neville out in the rain?’

‘No. We’ll think of something else,’ she told them hurriedly. She saw Snape getting ready to go at the head table and stood. ‘I think I’d better get going, though.’

Hermione had to put more crushed plants, stones, vials of blood and packets of fur away that evening.

Halfway through the third-year's essays, Snape heard a horrific crash from the storeroom. He shot to his feet and sped down to the door, his strides rather longer, his reaction faster than he might have thought.

Hermione had overbalanced and fallen, that much was clear. She lay at an odd angle, one of her arms broken so cleanly that the bone protruded from the flesh. Broken glass and bits of plant littered the floor around her, a stark contrast to the rest of the ingredients, neatly rowed with their labels facing outwards- the girl had been scrupulous with her organization of his stores.

But her head...Snape's breath stopped as he looked at the amount of blood flowing from her dark, bushy hair, soaking the strands a deep crimson.

'Miss Granger!' He dropped to his knees next to her, hastily casting a healing spell on her head. The blood stopped flowing.

'*Scourgify!*' he whispered, and it vanished. He lifted her head softly to check the floor, to touch the back of her skull. His fingers encountered no gaping holes. She was fine. Whatever the wound, he had closed it with his hasty bit of magic.

'*Ennervate,*' he commanded.

She blinked, tried to lift her head, and dropped it, looking about dizzily. He soothed her temples as he had seen Madam Pomfrey do with a student who had received a hard knock on the head.

Hermione relaxed, shutting her eyes. Someone was stroking her hair. It was so peaceful, so nice, just to be held...

...not just to be held. The hands on her head sent shivers down her body, not of fear or pain, but pleasure, a gentle, teasing touch. They went down to her arm, where she suddenly felt shooting pain...and then warmth that spread through her deliciously, wiping it away.

'Miss Granger?' The voice attached to those hands sounded worried. She opened her eyes to assure the owner that he didn't need to be. She was all right. It just felt wonderful to lie there and let him-

‘Professor!’ she cried, sitting up abruptly. She blushed a deep red as she realized it was his lap her head had been resting so gently in. ‘I...I...’ she stammered. She put her hand down in broken glass and yelped in surprise.

‘I’m so sorry that I broke those bottles!’ she managed to say. Hopefully he would think that was the reason for her sudden, flaming embarrassment.

‘It’s all-’ Snape stopped himself. It was *not* all right. ‘The ingredients you have wasted with your carelessness are expensive, Miss Granger. Are you often this lackadaisical with another’s things? I doubt you are so foolish with something as valuable as Potter’s Invisibility Cloak.’ She did not reply. Mortification was already draining to be replaced by fury, and the fear that he was going to force her to pay for all of it.

‘Clean it up and then your detention is over. And be more careful in the future with things that are not yours, Miss Granger.’

Hermione stiffened. But that was all Snape said. He not add detentions or subtract more points. She cleaned it up quickly and left, still burning brightly enough she decided she couldn’t go back to the Gryffindor common room. Harry and Ron would notice.

Instead, she walked to the library and started reading- only to discover that for the first time in her life she couldn’t concentrate on her book.

But her mind kept running over the feeling of his hands on her head, running through her hair, delicately touching her forehead and temples...no matter his nastiness, the cold reproof in his voice...

*He’s a teacher. He’s Snape*, her rational mind snarled. But her body would not rid itself of the physical memory, so strong it nearly felt as if he were doing it again, nor would it stop sending chills running through her.

‘What am I doing?’ she groaned aloud.



Snape leaned with his back against the door, almost palpably shaking. *A student. That student. She was hurt*, another part of him offered. *She is a child and she was hurt- Merlin! Yes, she is a child. I healed her- that should have been all. I healed her head, and her arm...*

*I can't face her in detention. She was mortified. I am mortified. But I can't let her out of it either...Enough. Whatever your fears, the lecture was enough to balance them. She can't know that I...I what?*

And Snape knew that he didn't really want to know the answer.

## Detention

‘Severus,’ Lucius nodded to him in greeting before matching his strides, leading him down the dank, rotting corridors of the Riddle House. ‘Our lord has been wondering where you were.’

‘Dumbledore knew I was in Diagon Alley.’

‘As one of us? Have you been compromised?’ The grey eyes stopped him, some worry for his own skin almost masking the gloating pleasure visible in his eyes. Snape knew Lucius would take exquisite delight in executing him- the blonde man’s hand was already reaching for his wand.

‘No. He didn’t know I came with you. Many of the professors were there, he assumed that I had come to the defense. I had to make my excuses to him before I could leave without arousing suspicion.’

‘Are you sure he suspects nothing?’

‘He thinks I am *his* spy. Do not be too disappointed, Lucius,’ Snape hissed. ‘Our lord would hardly be pleased if you killed me- and some gratitude is in order. I helped get you out of Azkaban.’

Lucius laughed coldly. ‘Indeed. That is a debt I am sure I will owe you many times over. Well, you have come just in time.’ A deadly smirk played about the older man’s mouth, now for a different victim. ‘We have captured the famous Harry Potter. Our lord is allowing us a little...sport.’

‘Again?’ Snape’s heartbeat soared. Harry Potter. Again. The boy had to run out of luck sometime, and Voldemort only had to get lucky once. Harry only had to die one time.

‘This time, it’ll end the boy. And elevate our Lord’s power. Finally this will be over and we will stand victorious. Dumbledore is too weak to carry on without him.’

‘Indeed,’ Snape picked up speed, and his voice was hard, almost gleefully so when he asked, ‘and where is our dear Mr. Potter?’

Lucius laughed. 'The best thing about you, Severus, is your eagerness. I know you have been waiting for your own chance at this boy. But nothing too damaging. A few bruises is all we're allowed. Come. He is down the hall.'

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*Six Months Prior...*

Hermione approached their Potions lesson with more than a little nervousness, her heart beating more wildly than it had ever pounded before, and that included Krum kissing her by the lake.

*I can't believe this*, she mocked herself pitilessly. *I'm like an eleven-year-old with my first crush*. But in spite of her efforts, her stomach continued to knot and unknot, vanish and reappear too heavily.

'Hermione? Are you all right?' Ron's hand was on her arm, and Harry put a hand on her back.

'Hey? You okay?' Harry echoed Ron.

'Yeah. I just...I don't know...these detentions must be getting to me more than I thought,' she replied, mustering a smile.

'Well, you only have tonight and tomorrow,' Ron said encouragingly, letting his hand travel down to hers and squeeze.

'Yeah,' she said again. The room was unlocked, and as usual there was no sign of Professor Snape. He enjoyed his sweeping, bat-like entrances. He seemed to think they set the right tone. She set up her ingredients, Ron, Harry and Neville unpacking all around her.

'Harry,' Hermione muttered under her breath, 'You stand closest to Neville. I'll give you instructions and you can pass them onto him.'

'Sure. Okay,' Harry readily agreed.

Snape slammed the door open, black robes billowing as he strode into the room in his accustomed, sinister manner. Dean and Seamus rolled their eyes at one another.

‘Today, we will be making an Immunity Draught, something useful against most flus and minor viruses if it is made properly.’ His eyes swept the room. ‘If it is not,’ his gaze settled on Neville Longbottom and a smirk touched his lips, ‘then it can make you very sick indeed.’

‘Instructions,’ his wand flicked and the obligatory writing appeared on the blackboard, ‘are on the board, ingredients are in the cabinet. You have an hour and a half.’

‘That looks complicated,’ Ron blanched, scanning the more than thirty steps of the potion.

‘Yeah, well, I guess we’d better start,’ Harry replied, eyeing the board as if it were a particularly large, furry spider. ‘Hey Neville- I’m gonna help you today.’ Neville cast a glance of panic back at Hermione, who was working a desk behind him.

‘It’s okay- Hermione’s going to help me,’ Harry told him. Neville nodded.

There were three liquids listed that Hermione did not have in her own potions kit. She

joined the throng at the cabinet, reaching for the last bottles- only to have a pale hand snake in and take them from just under her fingers.

‘Thanks, Granger,’ Draco Malfoy smirked. Hermione resisted the strong urge to slap him and instead turned to speak to Snape.

‘Professor, there is no more Mandrake solution, adulterated bubotuber pus or coreopsis extract.’

Snape stiffened slightly at the sound of her voice the movement so subtle that he doubted Albus Dumbledore would have noticed, before he answered her. ‘I believe you know where to find these items, Miss Granger?’ He took the keys from his desk and extended them to her.

She strode over, snatched the key with a swift, ‘Thank you, Professor,’ and started for the door.

‘We need some too!’ Parvati and Lavender chimed together.

‘Anyone else?’ Hermione asked. Neville raised his hand shakily. Hermione gave him her most reassuring smile before turning and walking three doors down.

*Obviously, he doesn’t think it’s anything out of the ordinary, Hermione thought stormily. I need to forget about it...I don’t even know what I’m thinking anymore...*

She carefully gathered her emotions and the vials and went back to class.

888

‘What’s wrong, mate?’ Harry asked Ron. They were sitting at their usual table in the common room, listening to the fire snap as they tried to get a head start on studying for their O.W.L.’s and write Transfiguration essays worthy of at least an “Acceptable” for Professor McGonagall.

Ron had given up all pretense of working and was now staring moodily into the flames, his two-sentence essay lying on the table next to him.

‘I can’t stop thinking about Hermione,’ he confessed, not looking at Harry. Harry knew how deeply this occupied Ron- his friend wasn’t even blushing or trying to avoid Harry’s eye. He was just looking at the orange tails whipping upwards into the chimney and drumming the table.

‘You’ve liked her since second year,’ Harry said softly. It was only ten, but the common room was mostly empty save for a few seventh years testing each other on N.E.W.T.’s material at the other end. ‘Why don’t you just do something about it?’

‘Not brave enough. Remember our fight about Viktor Krum?’

Harry rolled his eyes. ‘Yes. But she was never really into him. Well...sort of,’ he amended at the look on Ron’s face. ‘She definitely had a crush on you last year though, and I think during third year too.’ Harry felt awkward talking about Hermione this way- she was...Hermione. But Ginny had told him about this ages ago, when

he'd first arrived at Grimmauld Place that past summer, and he felt it was time Ron did something about it.

'Ask her for...' he cast around mentally, searching for a situation that wouldn't be too strange for best friends, 'ask her for a date in Hogsmeade the next time you go.'

'Would you come with Cho?' Ron asked eagerly. Harry found something very interesting to hunt for in his Transfiguration book as he replied:

'Er...no. I don't think so. She just wants to talk about Cedric Diggory...and she cries a lot. Besides, after her friend sold us out with the DA last weekend...'

'Oh. Right. Yeah- it's kind of Marietta's fault that Umbridge is Head now, isn't it?' Ron mulled this over, decided he didn't blame Harry for not wanting to go out with Cho again. 'D'you think that would work? Me taking her to Hogsmeade, I mean,' Ron asked seriously.

'Yeah, I think so. It's not too strange, and if I'm right, and she likes you too, she'll be thrilled. You just have to do it- Hermione'll never say anything,' Harry encouraged.

Ron took a deep breath. 'Well, Hogsmeade is in a couple weeks. I'll... I'll ask her tomorrow.'

'Good,' Harry said. 'Now, can we look up that thing on how Switching Spells are related to Animagi?'

888

*My last detention. My last detention.* Hermione chanted to herself on Wednesday night as she made her way down to the dungeons. *What's wrong with Ron?* she wondered in between her mantra. He had been jumpy all day, and Harry had kept giving him pointed nudges when he thought she wasn't looking. Come to think of it, both boys had refused to look her in the eye. This puzzle was interrupted by her arrival at the dungeon door.

She knocked.

‘Come in,’ Snape commanded. When she entered, he was already standing, pocketing his wand.

‘We are going to my potions lab this evening, Miss Granger. I expect you to take notes again.’

‘Yes sir,’ she answered, carefully controlling her excitement. He gestured for her to precede him down the corridor.

She stationed herself at the small desk in the room as he checked each potion again. But this time, instead of silence as he inhaled the different fumes, he spoke to her in a quiet, measured voice that she had never heard him use in class.

‘The cauldron nearest the door is an improved Wolfsbane Potion, containing moonstone,’ he told her. ‘Oddly enough, adding moonstone to that particular potion makes the full moon’s effects less potent. I am searching for a balance- one that will keep the werewolf from becoming a wolf at all at that critical time.’

‘This second one, the light red, is a blood-thickening solution to help with major injuries. It helps blood clot faster- so in the middle of a battle you will lose less of it. The third, which is this marbled black and white, is...’ and on it went. All the way around the room. Hermione wasn’t sure if she was supposed to write it all down, but she did anyway. If he didn’t want the information, she would surely keep it.

‘Bring me...the head of a fire salamander and a pinch of arsenic,’ he commanded when he was stationed around his cauldrons in the middle of the room again. She jumped to get them, bringing them carefully. Instead of returning to her desk, she risked a peek at the potion and a question.

‘Is this to create an immunity to curses?’ she asked, peering into Variant Four’s cauldron and getting a face-full of steam.

‘No. This is to be administered after a curse. The final product will not only wipe the effects of the curse from the drinker’s body, it will restore them to full health and the ability to continue fighting.’

‘Why add the fire salamander’s head to the potion?’

‘They’re creatures of extraordinary endurance, and of course, they have to use magic to spit fire and endure the flames. They will flush out the Dark Magic and their strength is transferred to the drinker.’ They moved to Variant Two. Snape poked at it with his wand and glowered. ‘Bring me more crushed garnet. Flakes this time, not powder.’

‘Might it not work better if it were both amethyst and garnet?’ Hermione asked before she thought. Snape frowned into the dark blue liquid for a moment and then nodded.

‘That might be exactly the balance necessary,’ he murmured. He thrust out his hand, clearly expecting her to hand him his tools.

‘Go back and write this down, Miss Granger,’ he snapped as he trickled the flakes of stone into the cauldron, watching them glitter purple and red-orange in the candlelight.

Sighing, Hermione retired to her desk, where she recorded his rapidly spoken words.

‘Perhaps a touch of jade?’ Snape wondered, prodding the surface, which was now a rich purple. The potion seethed at him. ‘No, I think not.’

‘Ivory? For purity?’ Hermione offered from where she was seated. She could not believe her mouth. It seemed to have run away with her. The urge to solve the mystery was greater than any fear of Snape.

‘Miss Granger,’ he hissed silkily. ‘You forget yourself. No student has even been in here before. You are the first. You are also likely to be the last. Just as I do not allow students to help with my grading, it is unthinkable to allow you to assist with my private brewing. You will kindly be silent. Given the other ingredients, ivory may well cause the entire concoction to explode.’

‘Yes, professor,’ Hermione bent her head back to her work.



Neither paid attention to the time.

888

'Where is Hermione?' Ron asked as the clock ticked towards twelve-thirty.

'I dunno. Detentions aren't allowed to go on after midnight,' Harry replied. 'And the dungeons aren't that far away.'

'You think she's okay? Maybe we should go check,' Ron said, rising.

'Nah,' Harry said. 'Relax, Ron. You know Hermione. Even Snape can't deter her. She probably thought of some dire question to ask him right as detention ended.'

888

Snape cursed under his breath. Variant Two was the most promising of all, and still something was wrong with it...ivory might explode the cauldron. But it also might create the perfect balance. How did Granger know?

*She's smart. Possibly brilliant. That is undeniable. And her talent with Potions would be the envy of many masters.*

He strode to another room to get it. Hermione watched him go, started to rise and go after him. Perhaps he wanted to leave? She glanced at the clock. It was one-thirty in the morning. She stifled a groan. She had class tomorrow, and her Astronomy essay was only half finished.

But she did not leave, even though now she was within her rights to.

Snape billowed back in, holding a small, round, white rod. *Ivory*, she recognized, and ducked her head with a smile so that he wouldn't see.

But to her surprise, he came over and grabbed her arm, pulling her with him towards the door.

'Professor!'

‘Be still, Miss Granger!’ he snapped as he continued pulling her out of the room. ‘Adding the ivory is dangerous, as I told you.’ He muttered a spell, and glimmering shields sprang up over all the cauldrons except the one he was working on.

‘It is entirely possible that the ivory will destroy it. But the recipe is preserved, and the magical properties of ivory may well perfect the draught. I can only test it.’

He lifted the ivory with his wand and sent it sailing towards the surface of the unshielded cauldron. It hovered over the purple briefly before sliding in with a gentle sucking sound.

When nothing happened, Hermione started forward. Snape tightened his grip on her arm. ‘If you get blown up, Miss Granger, I don’t want to have to file the death report. Stay here.’

Snape’s hand remained around her arm as he counted to ten, then to twenty. The potion let out a low hiss and a sparkling, silver vapor rose from the mixture. The cauldron continued its placid bubbling.

‘Now,’ he said, releasing her. They crossed the stone floor together, each eager to see the results-

-they were six feet from the cauldron when it ignited. Iron shards rocketed out in every direction, and the hot liquid spurted wildly, coating walls and floor and dousing the fire instantly.

Snape felt the magic charge in the air right before it detonated. ‘Get down!’ he roared. He threw himself at Hermione and carried her to the floor, rolling to get them both behind the only protection in the room: the desk.

The ceiling shook with the echoes of the explosion as they lay there, their breathing quieting as the sounds of potion hitting stone gradually faded from a downpour to a murmur and then halted.

‘It burns,’ she whispered, remembering just in time not to touch her neck where a fiery pain stung.

‘That’s because it was boiling,’ he wiped it away with his sleeve.

‘You have some here, in your hair,’ she carefully rubbed the lump from his scalp before it could sear the skin.

‘It is safe to stand,’ Snape told her, flinching instinctively from her touch, only to find that he first had to disentangle himself. His robes were tangled up with Hermione’s legs- in his dash to get to safety it hadn’t mattered how intertwined they had become.

Hermione held her breath, not looking at him. In the dive and roll, he had ended up cradling her in his arms. She was inches away from him. Her existence seemed limited to the pulsing veins, to the pressure of his fingers wrapped around her arms. She could feel the beat of his heart racing through the arms encircling her back, and his breathing whispered across her forehead, making the tiny curls there flutter. She could feel her own pulse hammering in her chest, and she didn’t think it was entirely due to the panic or the exploding cauldron.

*This is revolting*, she told herself firmly. She rolled away from him, out of his embrace, allowing him to stand up unimpeded. The best thing to do would be to ignore it.

Snape was glaring at her. ‘And that, Miss Granger,’ he snarled, wiping himself off, discovering holes in his robes where the potion had burned through, ‘is why we do not add ingredients wantonly to new potions.’

‘Yes sir.’

Snape prodded the large puddle that had extinguished the fire underneath the now-shattered cauldron.

*And he yells at Neville for melting cauldrons?* Hermione thought, dumbfounded. If they had been closer to the cauldron, they would have been killed. Shards of the cauldron were imbedded in the stone walls around them. Any one of them could have taken off her head.

A low hiss escaped his mouth, and in spite of everything, he began to laugh. It was an ironic sound with a peculiar ring, a laugh both happy and disbelieving.

‘What is it?’

'It works,' he replied, laughter stopping as he recalled the presence of another in the room. 'The indicator spell says the potion has been perfected for my purpose. This is the right recipe.'

'But it explodes the cauldron.'

'That just means you have to give it a room to itself while you're brewing it. Such explosions can be channeled as long as we are forewarned.' The potion was a success, and even a cauldron now scattered throughout the chamber and Hermione's presence did not dampen Snape's elation.

*If he were always like that, I think I could admire him,* Hermione thought, quite against her will.

He waved his wand and all the potion conglomerated off the walls into a smaller vat. Much of the potion had been destroyed in the blast itself, but Hermione estimated he had perhaps a quarter of the original amount left to test.

'Testing on human subjects can begin tomorrow,' Snape murmured. 'Miss Granger, help me bottle it all, and then one vial will go to Madam Pomfrey, one to the Headmaster-' he stopped, a frown flitting across his face, 'one to Grimmauld Place, where the Headmaster will find it,' he amended, 'and the rest will be stored here until there is further need for them.'

She followed him to yet another room, and gasped.

This room was enormous. The high, vaulted ceiling was painted with scenes of potions masters of the past, and shelves stretched to the ceiling, most of them containing potions.

'Did you invent all of these?' she whispered in awe.

'No. Most of the shelves have a vial of each potion invented by every master to teach at Hogwarts. It is an archive of sorts. Here are mine.' Somehow, Hermione was not surprised to see three full shelves with his name scrolled on them. Cruel and heartless Snape might be, but brainless or lazy- no. He placed one vial of the new potion carefully on the shelf, labeling it with its number and then a question mark.

'It is a work in progress. In practical tests, we don't yet know how it will fare,' he explained to her raised eyebrow. 'Therefore, it is only a tentative success. Put the rest of the bottles on the ground with these others.' Vials and beakers for other potions that were being tested littered the floor next to them. Hermione carefully arranged hers in neat rows along the wall.

'Professor?' she said as they turned to go.

'Yes?'

Hermione hesitated. It was an awkward thing to say at best...the simplest way would be the least uncomfortable. No dramatic words or beating around the bush. 'Thank you for saving my life.'

She expected a sneer, some snarled reference to her clumsiness or stupidity. But he simply inclined his head and replied, 'You're welcome.'

After she left, Snape buried his head in his hands, covering his eyes as if that would remove the memory her body had burned into him. So close, their bodies tangled together...he had thought he might stop breathing.

But the look on her face as she had rolled away was disgusted, revulsion flashing bright in her dark eyes. His fingers tightened on his skull. *She hates you. And you her. She's a Mudblood. Ah...but you don't believe in that anymore...But she is a student. A child.*

888

'Hermione!'

Hermione nearly groaned aloud. Ron. It was not at all what she had been expecting to find when she got back from the potions classroom. It was, after all, two in the morning.

'I couldn't sleep- and I knew you weren't back yet...how did that...' here followed several words Hermione knew he didn't dare say at home, 'keep you another two hours?'

Hermione opened her mouth to explain, then stopped. It was...private. She didn't want to tell anyone. No one else had ever been in the lab, Snape had said, and she didn't want to tell Ron or Harry especially. They would probably insist on using the invisibility cloak to "discover" what he was doing.

'He didn't,' she managed to lie in credible time. 'I went to the library to do some work

on McGonagall's essay.' Hopefully, Ron would not remember that the library closed at midnight.

She needn't have worried. Ron stared at her incredulously, then smiled slowly. 'You're unbelievable, Hermione. Totally unbelievable.'

Hermione settled down to actually finish her Astronomy essay, tired enough to ignore Ron's sudden fidgeting.

'Erm...Hermione?' he asked a minute later, hoping his voice sounded deep and mature instead of high-pitched and nervous.

'Ummm?' she replied non-committally.

'Are you going to Hogsmeade in a couple weeks?'

'Probably,' she murmured, reaching into her bag for another book.

'Well, I would like, I mean, if it's okay with you, I thought it would be great...' he trailed off. There was enough anxiety in his voice that Hermione lifted her head and smiled at him.

'What is it?' she asked quietly.

'I...er...would you, would you like to go to Hogsmeade with me?'

Hermione struggled to keep her jaw shut. It was the last thing she had expected to hear tonight. 'Like...on a date?'

'Yeah. Yeah. Like on a date,' he replied steadily, his voice suddenly much smoother.

Hermione swallowed. If anyone had asked two weeks ago if this was what she wanted, she would have answered yes without any qualifications. Absolutely. She had liked Ron for nearly three years. Surely it hadn't evaporated?

*No, she told herself firmly. I just thought it would be impossible, so I put it away, out of sight...I went out with Victor and this new-WRONG- thing about Snape...surely that's just because I never thought Ron would be interested? It's just...misdirected hormones. I can make it go away. I really want this.*

'Of course,' she said with a huge smile.

'Great!' A little awkwardly, Ron leaned forward and kissed her cheek. 'Well, see you tomorrow, Hermione.'

She just nodded, trying furiously to quell the little voice in the back of her head that was promising her that it was already too late. She had passed some indefinable turning point.

She shoved that voice behind a mental door and locked it. She *could* tame this. And she would.

## Joining Pains

'Where is she?' Severus Snape was standing in the Headmaster's office, his black eyes steady on Dumbledore.

'Hermione is still at St. Mungo's, Severus,' Dumbledore replied calmly. 'She is in the best of care. How does the Dark Lord? And is Harry Potter all right?'

Snape shook his head, and gave Dumbledore an even look nearly as piercing as the Headmaster's own. 'We have to rescue him.' His sallow face twisted, as if the words he was speaking were physically painful, 'If the Dark Lord completes his plan, we are lost.'

'How? How much time do we have?'

'The Dark Lord is saving him for a ceremony that can only be conducted at Samhain, the strongest night for conducting Dark Magic other than Imboloc.'

'Samhain. That gives us six weeks.'

'He is under Wards of the Elements, Light and Dark, and under the Kin Ward, which the Dark Lord can now claim since it is Potter's blood that brought him back to life.' His eyes asked what his voice would not, a quiet challenge to Dumbledore's power. *Can you break them?*

Dumbledore shuddered. No. He could not. Not alone, and possibly not at all.

They were going to have to find another way to rescue Harry Potter. But Severus had done what he could for now, and his nerves were raw, frayed with a new emotion and an old magic that he could no longer dam up.

'Headmaster...may I go? Can I visit...?' He could not say her name.

'Of course,' Dumbledore told the man before him. 'Of course. Go.'

Snape inclined his head in thanks and strode out.



'He *is* getting to be a danger to himself,' Minerva emerged from the bookshelves, where she had been able to hear the entire conversation unobserved.

'His devotion to her is unquestionable,' Dumbledore murmured. 'Minerva,' he looked exhausted, sinking back in his chair, 'what have I done?'

'Nothing, Albus,' she said firmly. 'You will recall...Dolores Umbridge was Headmistress when this all started?'

He leveled her one of his x-ray gazes and laughed a little, sadly. 'It doesn't matter. I was

the one who knew, and...no, I don't suppose I could have...'

'No, Albus. There was nothing that could have changed this. And remember- as of yet, it remains unconsummated. The man is fighting a battle with his soul.'

'He will lose,' the Headmaster murmured tiredly. 'He is gradually slipping. And she... she too will be swallowed by it.'

888

*Six Months Prior...*

Ron settled himself at the breakfast table next to Hermione, a little awkward, a little anxious and very pleased with himself. He debated whether he should take her hand. But maybe not. She'd never held hands with Krum. Maybe Hermione wasn't the hand-holding type.

He decided to keep his hands to himself until they could go to Hogsmeade. Surely, holding hands then would be okay.

'Good morning,' he said to her.

'Hi, Hermione,' Harry greeted her as well, without the strain and with a slightly cocky grin on his face.

‘What’re you smiling about?’ she asked peevishly. She still had an inch to go on her Astronomy essay and was barely managing to put her eggs in her mouth instead of all over her books.

‘Nothing,’ Harry replied, but the grin remained fixed through the meal as Ron dropped more things than usual in his nervousness.

‘Careful- she’ll watch you when you play Quidditch,’ Harry teased gently. Ron reddened slightly and swore to himself that he would learn how to save every post between now and their last game.

888

If Hermione thought that Snape’s civility shown in the lab would hold over into the rest of her life, she was mistaken.

‘Say it again, Malfoy. There’s no one here to protect you,’ Harry hissed, wand already extended. Ron’s was out too, and Hermione had her hand clenched around hers in her pocket.

‘Yeah, Potter? All right.’ Draco grinned broadly. ‘Your mother was a whore-’

A blast of light issued from Harry’s wand, silencing Malfoy and making him drop like an abandoned toy to the stone floor.

‘Potter!’ Snape was gliding along the passageway towards them, black billowing in his wake like a sail.

‘Professor!’ Hermione hurried to the fore, ‘Malfoy provoked him without reason-’

‘When I want your opinion, Miss Granger, rest assured I will ask for it. Ten points from

Gryffindor for your mouth. Now,’ he said softly, ‘what happened?’

As usual, Crabbe and Goyle described what Snape wanted to hear, and he turned back to the three.

'I think it's a detention with Filch for all three of you, and fifty points from Gryffindor for your attack on Mr. Malfoy.'

Hermione thought steam was going to start pouring from Ron's ears, he was trying so hard not to curse at Snape. Her eyes too were narrowed angrily, but for different reasons. *How can he? He knows Malfoy started it!*

888

A knock came on Snape's private lab two evenings later. It had to be Dumbledore or Minerva. No one else knew he was here...

Sighing, he waved his wand at the potion and unlocked the door saying, 'Enter.'

To his surprise, Hermione Granger stepped into the room.

'What do you think you are doing here?' he asked, just a shade shy of furious.

'Filch had jobs for Harry and Ron, but said that I should come to you to get my detention.' He had sniggered about it too, seeming positively gleeful as he told her to get her detention from Snape. Did everyone know that she had been given so many detentions with him? But she quickly shelved her irritation and looked about, her mind already focused on one thing only. He watched her eyes traveling eagerly over the potions, itching to know...

'The other potion,' she finally blurted, 'the one you made, does it work?'

'It does. It was used on Mr. Malfoy this afternoon,' he said quietly, 'after your...attack.'

'You know he deserved it. *Sir.*'

'Granger, I thought you were intelligent. Another twenty points. You are going to lose the House Cup all by yourself.'

Hermione was sorry that anything saved Malfoy, and annoyed at Snape's deduction, but she couldn't help smiling because the potion had worked- and she had thought of the solution. 'Students won't be allowed to brew it, will they? It's too dangerous.'

Snape snorted. 'Miss Granger, this potion explodes when made correctly. Can you imagine the damage if it is brewed incorrectly?' He turned back to his work.

'Come,' he waved to her. 'You can bring me things from the store cupboard.'

The first thing he asked for, she floated over to them with magic. He glared at her. 'No magic. If you were a boy I'd cuff you for your disobedience. You must walk to get them. This is a *detention*, Miss Granger, not a lesson.'

'Yes sir,' she replied, her focus already on the potion again. 'What is it?'

'You are not here to ask questions,' he snarled. 'Be silent.' But Snape himself could not be still. After only a few moments, he spoke, part to her, part to himself and part to the potion. He explained bits of it, asked rhetorical questions and cursed or encouraged the solution by turns.

An hour later they were both bent over the cauldron, Hermione had brought him the latest ingredient (powdered rams horn). Snape stirred it with his wand, and Hermione leaned forward a little more. One of her long, curly locks of hair fell forward, almost brushing the glimmering surface.

Snape reached over, one hand still stirring, and gently brushed it back, his fingers lightly brushing her cheek, the faint kiss of a butterfly as they tucked it behind her ear. 'Do not let your hair become mixed in with the potion. It could have unforeseen effects.'

Hermione nodded, not trusting her voice. The touch of his hands sent rippling chills down her spine, making her shiver just slightly at the sensation. *Ron!* she thought desperately, *I'm going out with Ron. To Hogsmeade. Ron who I've waited for for three years.*

'Are you cold, Miss Granger?' he asked her, feeling her quiver.

'A little,' she lied.

'There is a spare cloak in the far cabinet,' he waved his wand, causing several drops of potion to splatter to the floor as the cabinet swung open.

She had little choice but to go get it, even though with seventeen fires the room was far from cold. She wrapped it around herself and returned to the simmering potion.

'Hmmm...' Snape took a vial of the potion from the cauldron. 'This has medicinal properties,' he muttered, and Banished it to a shelf in another part of the room before returning to his work.

'Is it complete?'

'No. But it has uses. That will go to Madam Pomfrey for testing.'

'Healing uses?'

'Minor ones. Perhaps boils, or acne or moles. Certainly nothing groundbreaking.'

He stood for a while more in silence, pushing and poking at the potion, testing it against others to record reactions. When a drop was mixed with a pinch Duskbloomer, it gave off smoke rings. Snape arched an eyebrow at it, then touched Hermione's shoulder.

'Get the essence of murtlap,' he ordered. She complied.

'Who funds all of this?' she finally asked after the murtlap did not have the desired effect

and he was scowling at the small beaker he had been testing.

'The Ministry,' he replied shortly. No more was forthcoming, so she pushed her luck a little.

'The Ministry? How did they decide to fund you, sir?'

‘All professors have the right to a certain amount of Ministry funding,’ he told her. ‘If you are finished with the questions, Miss Granger?’

Hermione blushed. She would not ask anymore, though it rubbed her sorely not to. He knew so much, as was evidenced by this lab. How could he not want someone to talk to about it?

*He has all the other teachers, her logical mind instantly had its say, he has his colleagues, and of course, Professor Dumbledore. They have all completed Potions class, they all know at least some of what he knows. And Dumbledore knows everything he knows and then some. Why should he want to talk to me?*

Once again, it was early in the morning when Hermione left the room and found her way upstairs to tumble into bed.

888

O.W.L.’s were bearing down on them, and Hermione’s whispered instructions to Harry and Neville were all that was keeping them from failing, Harry was certain.

Snape seemed to ignore it now, or else didn’t have the energy to notice. Hermione wondered if his work for the Order was getting harder, or if he was just avoiding Harry. Since the Occlumency lessons had halted, he hadn’t spoken to their corner of the room.

‘You really ought to ask him about Occlumency again, Harry,’ she told him seriously after Potions on Friday.

‘Hermione- get over it,’ Harry rolled his eyes. ‘He reckons I can do it myself now, all right?’

The last Hogsmeade weekend was scheduled right before O.W.L. week. Ron was getting more nervous as the date approached.

‘It’s okay, mate,’ Harry laughed. ‘It’s not so hard. Look, it’s Hermione, we’ve been to Hogsmeade with her loads of times before.’

‘Yeah, but this time, you won’t be there.’

‘Would you like me to be?’ Harry grinned at him wickedly.

‘No!’ Ron assured him quickly. ‘I mean...well...you know what I mean.’

Harry laughed. ‘Yeah, I see how it works. Seriously, don’t worry Ron- I can’t come anyway. I’ve been restricted since the Rita Skeeter article, remember?’

‘Oh, yeah.’ Suddenly Ron thought of something else. ‘You don’t mind that me and Hermione won’t be here, do you?’

‘No Ron. I have three essays to write,’ Harry shook his head. ‘I sound like Hermione- but I should get at least one of them done without you two here to distract me.’

888

The Hogsmeade day dawned bright, cheerful...and completely dismal for Hermione. She had risen and put on dress robes of a rich red that accentuated not only her maturing curves but also the dark brown of her eyes and curly hair.

The robes were fine. It was the thought that had accompanied them unbidden as she had looked in the mirror: *I wonder if Snape would like them?* that had instantly blackened her mood.

‘Wow, Hermione,’ Ron swallowed as he saw her descending the girl’s staircase, ‘you look... you look amazing.’

‘Thanks,’ she tried to smile, tried to put him at ease. *It’s his first real date*, she reminded herself. *He and Padma didn’t count, and he’s never really had the courage to ask out another girl...and how would he feel knowing that you woke this morning not just thinking of someone else, but a professor. That professor.*

‘Shall we?’ she asked, gesturing at the portrait of the Fat Lady.

‘Yeah.’ Ron found the courage to take her hand and lead her out. Hermione willed herself to feel the thrill that came with brushing against Snape, the shivers and flutters that her stomach had

summoned when his hand had so casually tucked her hair behind her ear...

...nothing. *It takes time. I've been distracted*, she assured herself fervently.

*Just how long*, her intuition whispered, *can you lie to yourself, Hermione Jane Granger? Just how long?* The pit in her stomach told her she could not do it long enough.

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Ron looked proudly at Hermione. She was gorgeous in her red dress, curls dangling over her shoulders. It felt good to finally be here, eating in a small local restaurant with her that could only be described as pleasantly cozy, even in the warm spring weather.

Hermione was enjoying herself enormously, smiling at Ron and laughing as he tried to eat pasta without splattering himself with the white alfredo sauce.

She stopped mid-laugh, her fork clattering against the china as it fell, spreading dressing over the white tablecloth. Pain lanced across her abdomen, sharp and pointed, like a knife slashing through her skin. She gasped.

'Hermione?' Ron whispered, 'Hermione, what's wrong?'

She couldn't breathe. Her breaths stopped in her mouth, unable to pass her closed throat...

'We'll Floo back to the castle,' Ron told her, lifting her bodily out of her chair and glaring at her house salad, as if that were the cause.

'Floo powder!' he barked at their waitress. At the look on his face and the pale whiteness of Hermione's skin as she struggled, doubled over, to breathe, the woman ran to get what he asked for.

No one commented about the unpaid bill.

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‘What is it?’ Ron demanded, fluttering about Madam Pomfrey worriedly. Harry had been called as well, and Professor McGonagall-though she was not yet there.

‘Was she cursed?’ Harry asked.

‘I don’t think so. There were some Ravenclaws in there, and some older people...nobody who would have cursed her,’ Ron replied anxiously.

‘Unless some of them were Death Eaters,’ Harry growled. ‘Hermione is known to be important to us, to me. And she’s a Muggle-born. They could have just thought it was funny to cause us worry.’

‘What’s this about Miss Granger?’ McGonagall was sweeping up the ward towards them, worry etched on her face.

‘For Heaven’s sake, Minerva, I can’t have everyone in here at once!’ snapped Madam Pomfrey. ‘I don’t even know what’s wrong yet.’

‘Potter, Weasley,’ McGonagall’s firm voice was kind, ‘if you will give us a half hour?’

‘But-’ Ron started to protest.

‘Mr. Weasley. Please,’ McGonagall started steering both of them quite forcibly towards the door.

‘You haven’t told Dolores, have you?’ McGonagall asked urgently as the door closed on the boys’ heels.

‘No,’ Pomfrey’s mouth twisted. ‘Certainly not. I have more respect for Miss Granger than that.’

McGonagall briefly inspected Hermione, cast a spell, and paled. ‘I will call the Headmaster. He will have to know...this is no ordinary injury.’ She murmured a spell, closing her eyes and calling to mind the dear shape of her husband. *Come to the hospital wing...Albus, come to Hogwarts...*

Dumbledore materialized, holding a silver button Portkey. 'Yes Minerva? What...' his eyes fell on Hermione.

'What happened to Miss Granger?'

'She collapsed while she was in Hogsmeade with Mr. Weasley,' Madam Pomfrey told him. 'She couldn't breathe, said she felt like she'd been sliced across the middle.' Dumbledore's hand was already on Hermione's forehead. He staggered slightly, and let go.

He collected himself to say, 'Poppy, if you would excuse us for a moment?' She huffed at him, clearly thinking that whatever he had discovered, she had a right to know.

'Please, time is very short.' His eyes slid out of focus and he winced before regaining his usual calm. 'Your new Head will be here in a few minutes. She has enough spells around Hogwarts to know that I have disrupted them.' Pomfrey glowered, but turned and left, entering her office with a quiet slam of her door.

He instantly closed his eyes again, planting his feet firmly on the stones as if taking root in them. Which was what he was doing. He took a single deep breath and let it out slowly, his head swinging gradually from side to side, as if he were looking for something with his eyes shut.

Dumbledore took a long time, his eyelids fluttering occasionally as Minerva stood patiently. Years of marriage to Albus Dumbledore had taught her that nothing could hurry this great man and his magic if he did not wish it. Finally, the blue orbs flickered open. The tiredness in them astonished McGonagall. She had never seen Dumbledore look so drained.

'She is Bound,' he whispered, his eyes widening as the impact of what he had learned hit

him fully. He focused on McGonagall and quickly explained to her:

'Since the Headmasters of Hogwarts are connected to very stones of the castle, I was searching for what they could tell me. In the stones are the memories of the actions that have taken place around

them...' he trailed off, his focus once again on sorting the information he had received.

'Bound? With who? Albus- what did you find? To whom is she Bound? It's not Harry Potter?'

'No. The bond is one of the Magics of Ang'guin Weyr.' Minerva sucked in her breath slowly, not quite a gasp, in surprise. One of the Raw Magics, from an age when magic raged wild and the most powerful sorcerers ruled.

'Conscious or unconscious?' She was almost afraid of the answer.  
*Let it be conscious...*

'Unconscious,' Dumbledore confirmed. Minerva took his hand, sinking onto the nearest bed. The unconscious fusion of two souls was so rare that the last recorded incident had been nearly a thousand years prior. It was an old form of matching between two souls of the greatest power, an outdated convention to control magic from another age. The two spirits had to connect so deeply that it went past the connection of the waking mind or the heart. Often, those bound did not know it at first and only discovered it through violent upheaval. Miss Granger's mysteriously crippling accident certainly qualified.

'I...Albus...to whom?' she asked again.

Dumbledore did not answer her immediately, but instead asked: 'Severus is gone this weekend, yes? To Voldemort?'

'He is gone.'

'He will be in a bad condition indeed when he returns, if this is Hermione's reaction.'

Minerva had not been married to Dumbledore for decades for nothing. She could read his seemingly cryptic messages. 'Severus? Surely... Albus, he is twenty years her senior... not *Severus*.'

Dumbledore gave her an even look. 'The stones do not lie. Neither does the bind. It is Severus Snape.'

## Raw Magic

Snape glared at the door. His spell told him there were eight people inside the private ward, Hermione and seven others. *At least three Weasleys, Neville Longbottom...perhaps her parents?* He could not simply stride in and speak to her with that many people inside. He hesitated, trying to clear his head. He couldn't simply waltz in and speak with her anyway.

The door was thrown open. Arthur Weasley blinked when he came face to face with him. 'Are you here to see Hermione?' Arthur asked suspiciously.

'As a matter of fact, I am,' Snape replied coldly. 'The Headmaster asked me to check in with her.'

'Minerva already came,' Arthur seemed determined not to let him in. *No surprise. He probably thinks I'm last thing she needs right now. And he would be right.* The girl needed to heal, not to be confronted with an unreleased and unfathomable desire. But the need to see her for himself was strong enough to propel the next words out of his mouth.

'Nevertheless,' he said softly, 'he has sent me and here I am. If you'll excuse me?' And Arthur had no choice but to let him pass as he left, frowning deeply.

'What are you doing here?' Ron snarled as soon as Severus entered the room. But Snape's eyes were on Hermione, drinking her in.

His two-day absence in the presence of his master had indeed found her much improved. She was sitting comfortably, bandages around one arm, and he suspected around her middle, but she seemed healthy, if pale. Her eyes brightened, almost burning and the edges of her mouth quirked briefly into a smile as she looked at him.

That acknowledgment was more than enough. His own eyes, soft for an instant, hardened immediately, and she stiffened under his stern glare, wiping her face blank of all emotions save wariness. Molly Weasley, on the other hand, seemed quite happy to see him.

'I'm simply checking in,' Snape told her, his voice dangerously quiet. 'The Headmaster wanted to know if Miss Granger required anything?'

'Potions assignments,' she replied promptly, without any trace of irony. Snape controlled the urge to laugh aloud. Hermione was well beyond her classmates, her need for continuing Potions study- or any other except perhaps Transfiguration- was only for the record. But she never scorned schoolwork, or placed herself above her peers. She was...a perfect student. For all her hand-waving, her humility was admirable, and for all her brains, she still helped others instead of disdaining them. Her intellect was coupled with an amazing innocence of manipulation- the mark of distinction that he had first found beautiful, a matter of the mind and the spirit rather than the body.

*Stop it. She is not for you.*

'Very well, Miss Granger,' he sneered. 'Mustn't fall behind, must you?' Ron, Neville, Fred and George glowered at him. Ginny ignored him. Hermione did not reply, but dropped her gaze as if embarrassed. Which he could feel she was, but not for the reasons that everyone else would suppose.

'If there is nothing else?' he asked, already turning to go.

'No,' Ron muttered quite audibly.

'I believe I would have asked you if I wanted your answer, Mr. Weasley?'

'Ron! Be respectful of your professors,' his mother hissed.

Snape exited, Apparating immediately to retrieve her books. He dared not stress his self-control by waiting for her to be alone when he brought them back.

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*Five Months Prior...*

*Just a little farther...* Snape appeared directly in McGonagall's office, barely remembering that it was her he had to turn to now, since Dumbledore was gone, his office sealed against Umbridge.

She seemed entirely too ready for him, but he didn't have time to wonder why or care how she knew that he would be teetering on the brink of collapse. Her couch had been covered with dark sheets and as he swayed, she was suddenly there, her shoulder a support as he staggered to the covered couch and fell, almost lifeless.

McGonagall threw powder in the fireplace and called, 'Poppy? I need you here now!'

The nurse whirled in the flames, spinning briefly until she stepped out, brushing off ash habitually as she crossed to the couch.

'Oh, God...Minerva...'

'He has to be ready to teach tomorrow,' she told Pomfrey.

'I'm not sure he can be...this is ugly, Minerva.'

'I know.' McGonagall hesitated. But Snape had to teach. 'Could you use... assistance?'

'Of what kind?' Pomfrey snapped, wand already out and assessing damage. 'He is suffering from an abundance of internal bleeding, as well as curses, knife wounds... whatever they did to him this time, it was vicious. I could use another Healer,' she admitted, 'but we don't have one on the staff.'

McGonagall took a deep breath. She had read a description of the effects of an unconscious Ang'guin Binding. Unsurprisingly, as with most magical bonds, if one of the bound pair was injured, the magic of the other half had a greater effect while healing. It was possible that given her considerable natural talent coupled with the bind, Hermione could heal him almost as effectively as Madam Pomfrey, giving him two doctors to repair his extensive wounds.

'Miss Granger may be able to help you.'

‘Miss Granger? I am unaware of any special talent she has regarding healing,’ Pomfrey replied shortly, still completely focused on her patient. ‘And she was just released from the hospital wing herself this afternoon.’

‘Miss Granger is extraordinarily talented at many things, and this is going to take a great amount of powerful magic to heal so that he is in shape and without scars for class tomorrow. You know that if you do it yourself you’ll be weak for days, Poppy.’

Madam Pomfrey had to sit back at that, and acknowledge its truth. She had rarely seen injuries on a still-breathing body as extensive as Snape’s were right now. ‘If you think it would be a valuable experience for her, I would be grateful for the help. But whether you summon her or don’t, I need quiet.’

McGonagall strode out of her office.

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Hermione was sitting with Harry, Ron and Ginny on the grass. They were studying, but every so often she would wince, flinch or stifle a cry. No one could tell what was wrong. Madam Pomfrey had been just as mystified as Harry and Ron. Driven by boredom, Hermione had persuaded a reluctant Madam Pomfrey to release her from the hospital wing since there was no diagnosis. But Harry and Ron had decided the best cure for her pain was to follow her about and jump to attention with her every movement.

‘You need anything?’ Ron asked anxiously for the twentieth time as she clutched her abdomen...*just a little farther*, she thought...and the pain vanished.

‘No...it’s gone,’ she said in relief. For the past day she had been in constant pain of one kind or another, spiking and fading...and now it was completely gone, as instantly as it had come.

But where had that come from? *Just a little farther*...it had been such a clear thought she felt it had almost been spoken aloud.

She had just managed to focus her mind again on her writing when: 'Miss Granger?' It was Professor McGonagall. She jumped to her feet, sending her parchment flying everywhere.

'Yes, professor?'

'I need you to come with me to my office. Now.'

Hermione waved her wand, putting her books, quills and ink into her schoolbag. She had never been ordered to McGonagall's office before, but something in McGonagall's expression made her hurry, though she wasn't nervous. She hadn't done anything wrong...

'We'll come too,' Harry and Ron were both on their feet, books in hand. McGonagall pinned them with a glare.

'You will do no such thing,' she said in her no-nonsense voice. 'If I'd wanted all three of you, I would have asked for all three of you. Don't worry boys. Miss Granger will be out shortly.'

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Snape was still stretched out on the couch, unconscious, Madam Pomfrey working on his wounds when they walked in.

'Minerva says you're here to help?'

'Yes,' Hermione managed to whisper. She was appalled to see Snape this way. And she couldn't think why. She had seen Harry after his encounters with Voldemort and she hadn't felt despair. But this feeling clutched her soul in icy fingers, and almost instinctively, she dropped to her knees and clasped his head in her palms, murmuring an incantation she hadn't known she knew.

Madam Pomfrey glanced at her in surprise, then muttered, 'Good girl. Thank you, Minerva.'

'Remember, Miss Granger- do not tell anyone what you did here today. Except Potter and Weasley, of course,' McGonagall permitted as Hermione opened her mouth. There were some things it just did



no good to forbid. 'But be mindful whom you speak around.' Hermione nodded.

'If you wish, Miss Granger, I would be glad to have you as an apprentice or assistant,' Madam Pomfrey offered as they left Minerva's office. 'You certainly seem to be a natural healer.'

'Thanks,' Hermione replied awkwardly, 'but I have so much work to do before my O.W.L.'s...maybe I could think about it next year.'

'If you ever change your mind,' Madam Pomfrey told her seriously as they parted in the hall, 'I will be glad to have you.'

Hermione smiled at her and started back outside, only to find her feet instead going to her

dormitory.

*What is WRONG with me?* She almost wanted to scream. Thought had flown from her head in McGonagall's office. Was that what it was like to be a true natural? Did thought leave Harry when he flew? Was his brilliance on the Quidditch pitch instinct alone?

She doubted it. Seeing Snape, she had simply reacted on a rush of adrenaline so pure it was like injecting it. Where the knowledge had come from she didn't know. She doubted she could recall any of it to help one of her friends. Looking at him bleeding and torn had filled her with a fear so complete that nothing else had entered her mind. He *had* to get better. That was all she had cared about, from the instant she laid eyes on him until the minute her hands had left his body.

*What am I doing? Have I forgotten who he is? How he acts? How he treats Harry and Ron? And me? The fact that he was a Death Eater?*

Then another thought, more poisonous than the others, stuck in her head. McGonagall knew. Whatever it was, McGonagall knew. It was why she had gotten Hermione in the first place. She rose from her bed, where she had flung her stuff and was halfway to the door before she stopped. No. Harry demanded answers from teachers,

she, Hermione, did not. Would not. If McGonagall thought she should know, it would be explained. Someday, it probably would be.

Hermione shouldered her bag, shoving the incident firmly to the back of her head where it belonged. She had O.W.L.'s to study for.

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It was, at long last, the final day of classes before the study period for their O.W.L.'s began.

'Miss Granger, I expect you at my desk after class,' Snape spat as they were packing up the ingredients of their final potions.

*Why?* She hadn't even been whispering instructions to Neville. She hadn't done anything. *Ah- but Snape doesn't need reasons. He's Snape.*

'We'll wait for you,' Harry murmured. 'And don't let that...that...thing give you any more detentions for saving his dungeon from potions disasters.'

Hermione quashed the urge to tell them not to wait and simply smiled. 'I'll hurry,' she promised. Ron gave her cheek a quick kiss, to fortify her, she supposed.

She approached Snape's desk warily. She did not want another reminder of how his touch fluttered in her stomach with Ron's mouth-print still warm on her face.

Snape had seen the Weasley boy kiss her, and the sensation of jealousy that had seized his midriff almost left him breathless. *Anyone with half a brain could have seen that coming,* he scolded himself. *She is his age. Still a student, still a girl. Perhaps talking to her is a mistake...no, it is only fair. She helped me, after all. Never let it be said that I do not re-pay my debts, or at least acknowledge them.*

'Professor McGonagall told me that you helped in my healing,' he said slowly, after making her wait there for several long, awkward seconds as the class filed out.

‘Yes sir. She asked me to.’

‘You did well. I feel...fit this morning.’ The words were rough, as if he did not use them often, and it was not a ‘thank you’ but she could hear the sincerity, and she nodded and replied:

‘You’re welcome, sir.’ They stood for a moment, awkwardness charging the air, seething over something that seemed to run much, much deeper...

*I want-*, the thought finally started its treacherous say. As soon as it flickered across his mind, he threw it out. But then she spoke:

‘Sir, do you require any more help in your lab?’

‘What?’ he hissed dangerously. Hermione knew she tread on thin ice, but she did not drop her eyes as she repeated her request.

‘I thought...perhaps you could use the help of another brewer.’

‘Miss Granger, I never dreamed that even you would have the temerity to ask for something so blatantly inappropriate. Other teachers may *run* to get your help, but I assure you that I do not- nor can I be flattered into joining everyone’s favorite fan club. Ten points from Gryffindor. You are dismissed,’ he said, his voice colder than usual.

‘Yes sir.’ She left quickly, refusing to let him see the embarrassment burning in her face.

*I what? I want... Nothing.*

The girl had offered- more surprising had been the part of himself that had thought to say yes. But he could never have someone invade his privacy like that. He shivered at the idea of enduring her company voluntarily.

Still, she loved the subject, had a passion and a talent he found rare in a student. It was more than he had ever seen in another, not just talent but the sheer desire, a force of will so strong it had persisted through five years of his sneering, of his insults, of his punishments.

And still she had asked to help him. Volunteered. The girl must be mad to want to spend time with him. But the yearning after knowledge was a thirst that could not be slaked, as he had learned when he was younger.

Determined to set aside her odd behavior, and his own stranger response, he pulled his reading glasses out of his desk and began reading the first year essays.

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‘He didn’t give you anymore detentions?’ Ron asked hopefully as Hermione settled down to dinner next to them.

‘No,’ she laughed. ‘I told you- I,’ she glanced around, altered what she was going to say, ‘helped him. He thanked me.’

‘Thanked you? That’s a first.’

‘He has manners,’ Hermione defended him before she thought.

‘Kind of. He helped me out first year because my dad saved his life,’ Harry conceded, taking a forkful of steak and kidney pie.

‘Yeah. And he’s been a git ever since to make up for it,’ Ron said.

‘Yeah,’ Harry admitted.

‘You wanna take a walk around the lake after we study tonight?’ Ron whispered in Hermione’s ear while Harry and Seamus debated the proper wand movement for Cheering Charms.

She bit back her reflexive ‘No’, and instead said, ‘Well, we do have a lot of studying, Ron...’

‘After that. It doesn’t even have to be a long walk,’ he quickly added. ‘Just a little time to ourselves. If you feel okay?’

He was handing her an out, she could say she was still in pain...

‘I’d love to,’ she told him, against her loudly screaming better judgment.

'Hermione?' Ron's voice was shy, as if he were afraid of intruding upon her.

'Yes?'

'Are you all right? You're really...quiet.'

'I'm fine,' she lied. It was hard to walk around the lake with Ron, feeling his short fingers and callused palms and remembering the smooth palms and hardened fingertips of Severus Snape when he brushed her hair away from her face. Ron was many things...but his touch was not gentle the way Snape's was...

*But it doesn't mean anything to Snape when he touches me, she reminded herself. He only touches me out of precaution, or to get my attention. But Ron...Ron gets nervous, and adorable. He likes to touch me. But her thoughts refused to behave. I like it when Snape touches me.*

They were on the far side of the lake when Ron leaned over and kissed her. She flinched unexpectedly, panic rearing in her like a striking snake.

She fought the urge to pull away, willing herself to relax, to enjoy it. But it was too late. Ron was sensitive to her movements and instantly withdrew. 'I'm sorry, Hermione. I thought you would be ready for it,' he apologized quickly. She could feel his hand shaking as he held her arm. 'Am I that bad a kisser?'

'It was just a little...surprising,' she covered quickly. 'No...you were very polite.' She laughed quietly, trying not to embarrass him. Shyness had made it an unsure and soft kiss. Not unpleasant.

*But not pleasant either. Oh, stop it!* she reprimanded herself. *Teachers are not allowed to touch students.*

'Oh.' A long pause, more distance around the lake before:

'Can I try again? This time, you'll be ready.' He was so eager that she didn't want to hurt him.

'Yes,' she tried to smile. She was lucky. In the dark, he could not see that it did not touch her eyes.

He kissed her again, this time with a little more confidence. He tasted...lighter than Viktor. And his smell was sweeter than Snape's slightly tangy, slightly bitter combination of herbs and animals.

*I can't keep stringing him along*, she thought as they continued around the lake, his fingers more confident in holding hers, rubbing her hand.

*And I AM stringing him along*. That was no longer deniable. If something were going to happen, it would have by now. But there had been no bright burst of light, no sudden strike of attraction. Indeed, the more she was with Ron, the more she wished that Snape wanted her, that it was Snape who was at her side instead of Ron.

*Maybe it's O.W.L. stress. Oh, Hermione*, this part of her mind always sounded like her

*mother, just admit it. You can't force it. You don't feel anything, stop lying. Stop playing games.*

As she bent over her Transfiguration notes later that evening, she promised herself that she would tell Ron that she wasn't ready for a relationship. After their exams.

Miss Granger, if you would kindly come with me?' Professor McGonagall stood next to Hermione's bed in Gryffindor tower. Hermione scrambled up, grabbing for her red robe.

'Get dressed, Miss Granger. This may take some time.'

Hermione dressed hurriedly, and raced down to the common room where she met Ginny Weasley, still doing up the top buttons on her robes. 'What...?' the girls said in unison. Ron tumbled down the stairs to join them, their professor right behind. McGonagall shooed them out of the portrait and took them at a brisk pace towards Dumbledore's office.

'Professor, what's going on?' Ron asked as they trotted to keep up with her long strides.

'As you know, Mr. Weasley, Potter was captured in Diagon Alley. We are going to see Professor Dumbledore about it.'

The three exchanged bewildered glances. Never before had they been included on something this important. But perhaps Dumbledore thought it was dangerous for them now as well?

Inside Dumbledore's office, the headmaster stood with Snape, both looking exhausted, each holding a small slip of paper. 'These are Portkeys. We are going to the Burrow for a meeting concerning Harry. You three are coming because I believe it unkind to keep you in suspense when Lord Voldemort-' he ignored Ron, Ginny and McGonagall's sharp breaths, 'has your best friend in his custody.'

'Please, Headmaster,' Hermione blurted, 'is Harry all right?'

'Yes. For now. He is still alive.' He handed McGonagall a slip of paper, which she presented to Ginny.

'Take it, Miss Weasley,' she commanded. When Ginny grasped it, they both disappeared. Dumbledore presented his own piece of paper to Ron. He took a deep breath, smiled at Hermione in sympathy for her partner, and they winked out of the office.

Hermione hesitantly stretched her hand, reaching for the paper in Snape's fingers. He was giving her the fiercely uncomfortable stare that made her blush and lower her eyes, praying that he could not read her mind, knowing that he could- without looking through her eyes. Her head bowed, she could not see the expression on his face, a tortured softness as he studied her, the first he had been able to do since she had arrived from the hospital two days ago. He schooled his expression as he noted with relief how well she'd healed, the red, rising to bright scarlet even now, in her cheeks.

'You're going to make me late, Miss Granger. I do not have time to waste while you study your toes, fascinating though they no doubt are. Take the paper.'

Hermione set her jaw and raised her face, infuriated by his snide command and her own all-too-familiar unbidden response. She brought her hand up deliberately, making sure it brushed over his long fingers as she took the paper. She heard him inhale sharply, and as she smiled her triumph at making him as acutely unsettled as he had made her, they jerked, and were moving.

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Three Months Prior...

'Hello dear,' Mrs. Weasley planted a swift peck on Hermione's cheek as she stepped off the Hogwarts Express.

'Hello, Mrs. Weasley.'

'We'll be moving off to the Burrow just as soon as...Arthur!' she waved frantically at her husband, 'over here!'

'Will Harry come with us?' Hermione asked as they started for the barrier.

'Not just yet. He has to go back to those-' here Mrs. Weasley stopped, nostrils flaring white as she gripped the trunk in her hand rather harder than necessary, 'those *relatives* of his.'



‘Why the Burrow, Mum?’ Ron had caught up to them, his trunk banging away awkwardly at his legs. ‘Why not...you know, the other place.’

‘It’s now owned by Harry, of course, and Dumbledore isn’t sure if it’s quite safe anymore for us to use. The house has apparently barred itself to those not of the right blood. And since the last remaining member of that blood...’ she trailed off, for both Hermione and Ron had saddened, eyes darkening at the memory of the man they had lost.

‘Anyway, dear,’ Mrs. Weasley pointedly changed the subject, ‘it would be most useful if you would agree to lend a hand with all the potions that need brewing. Professor Snape said you had “an aptitude” I believe is how he phrased it.’

Hermione’s heart lurched. The only teacher who had never been impressed by her, the only teacher who had only ever sneered at her perfection, the man who had taught her that no matter her book-learning and abilities, she would never be as good as Malfoy with his money and his name...had recommended her talents to Mrs. Weasley?

‘I will be glad to help, Mrs. Weasley,’ she replied, hoping her voice remained steady through the shock and growing sense of accomplishment. But she had helped him in his private laboratory, had assisted in his research...

In spite of the blanket of sorrow that had smothered them since Sirius’ death in the Department of Mysteries, Hermione felt a grin stretching her mouth and did not trouble herself to contain it.

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Hermione stretched, arching her back as she woke, smiling. While cleaning and expanding the Burrow and cooking for the Order wasn’t exactly her idea of fun, at least she was at headquarters, doing something.

Her smile faded as she looked at her newest roommate. Emmaline Vance’s breathing echoed rough and ragged in the room. Hermione’s

wand had been keyed to shock her if Emmaline took too long between breaths. She had lived the night, and was likely to make it now, but Hermione was exhausted. Not because her wand had shocked her, but because she had woken every few minutes to hear the reassuring rasping anyway.

It had certainly been different this summer. Cleaned, sterilized and magically expanded, the Burrow had become home, hospital and hideout. There was a locked room for special business. No one knew what went on in there, but Fred, George and Mundungus were the only users of the room and kept the Order supplied with anything they might need. Including, and especially, money. The laughs supplied by Weasley's Wizard Wheezes in Diagon Alley were desperately needed by a population fearful of Death Eater attacks. Between the twins and Dumbledore, and whatever Mundungus did on the side, the Order had all the Galleons it required.

Fred, George, Ron, Ginny, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley and now Harry- who had arrived after a record short time of one week at the Dursleys- were Hermione's constant companions, but there were many others whom she did and did not recognize who entered and exited the house.

Madam Pomfrey had simply shifted the infirmary from Hogwarts. Buckbeak the hippogriff had been given to Hagrid after much debate whether to move him to the Burrow from Grimmauld Place. Without Sirius, there was no one to care for him, and Harry had been eager to rid his life of as much that reminded him of his godfather as he could. Kreacher had curled up and died after the death of his last master, and Hermione had to admit she was glad. The look that Harry had given the body when found had curdled the blood in her veins. If Kreacher hadn't been dead, she was sure Harry would have killed him.

Now the infirmary was at the top of the house, the attic where the ghoul had lived, and all four beds were constantly full and overflowing. As Death Eaters started to pin down members of the Order, they were being hunted, and the Burrow was the only place in the world guaranteed to harbor them with a modicum of safety.

Neville and his Gran would be arriving in the last half of the summer. His Great-Uncle Algie was in the Order, and after learning all he had during the year, Neville was determined to help. His encounter with Bellatrix in the Department of Mysteries had changed him. Even his round face had been thinner that last week of school.

Eagerly, Hermione dressed. With a last quick check on Emmaline's steady, if slow, breathing, she headed to the room next door, a room added on to the house by magic. There just wasn't enough space for everything that they need in the Burrow. Fortunately, adding rooms was not as difficult as it would be on a Muggle house, though they did not add them lightly. Some Death Eaters were familiar enough with the house to notice if it were enlarged enormously.

This room had bookshelves full of potions texts, most came from the wizards and witches of the Order, their personal donations to the battle, but some of the most helpful she had found mysteriously. She wanted to know if Snape had slipped them to her, but his rare appearances punctuated the meetings going on, and she had never had the chance- or the nerve- to ask him.

Lining the walls, in between shelves, were cabinets arranged neatly with all the ingredients she could desire. Seven cauldrons simmered over fires. Six contained known medical potions that were needed in steady supply by the infirmary upstairs. One, and one only, was her indulgence cauldron, the one where she brewed new potions. Her current experiment combined a simple Wakening Potion with a Strengthening Draught. Her own disaster in the Department of Mysteries and the pain it had caused her had made her determined that all Order members should carry certain antidotes and anti-curses with them.

As she poked over it, she heard steps in the outer room. She turned around, perhaps Emmaline was waking-

-Snape was in her lab, bent over the cauldron closest to the door, his hooked nose nearly in the solution. For an instant, proud triumph flashed over his features, pride for her, for her accomplishment, triumph for its testament to his teaching.

And then the regular disdainful scowl settled back into place as he lifted his head to look at her.

‘Brewing for the infirmary, Miss Granger?’

‘Mrs. Weasley said it was your suggestion, sir,’ she replied steadily, and then stirred her experiment counter-clockwise three times, purposefully ignoring him. He had no right to be in her space.

It *had* been his suggestion. It was a crime to waste her intelligence and talent on mere cleaning- any brute could do that, and Potter and Weasley were certainly lacking in the brains to do anything else during the summer. But it mildly irritated and intrigued him that she took pride in the fact that he had suggested it- that she regarded it as more than a practical thought. Which it was. Watching her work- she was so precise, her movements had a sure and steady cadence, like a slow and intricate dance- she belonged in a research room, a place where it was all study and result, experimentation and annotation- he was struck again at how at home she looked. She made the lab a natural setting for her brilliance.

‘You need a blood-thickening agent in that one,’ Snape told her, breaking his own spell and crossing to the cauldron in three long strides, peering in. ‘Part of your weakness, Miss Granger, was the loss of blood. I would have thought that would be obvious to you after undergoing it yourself.’

‘Your notes said that a blood-thickening agent would ruin a Strengthening Draught,’ she

contradicted. ‘And the incredible weakness, more than the blood loss, was what kept me out, Professor.’ Snape rocked back, staring at her.

‘My notes? Miss Granger...am I to understand that you are using my research?’

‘Well...if that’s what these notes mean,’ she waved a parchment before his eyes, suddenly uncertain. They were just notes. They weren’t published...but maybe he would think she was stealing it from him anyway. ‘It’s your handwriting sir, and it was tucked in a book for fourth-year potion students.’ Her statement was part defense, part

apology and part explanation. But he simply grabbed the notes from her hands.

Snape scanned the paper and a smile quirked his mouth sarcastically, his widened eyes returning to their narrow, contemptuous slits. 'This is ancient- and incorrect, the foolish assertions of a fourth-year potions student. Only some agents render the draught useless. Tut tut, Miss Granger, I thought you reveled in your thoroughness of research. That's a bit of a slip up for you, isn't it?' He swept from the room without uttering another word.

Hermione glared after him, why he had to make her interest in his subject a battle instead of a joy was beyond her. She grabbed one of the advanced books off the shelf to look up the effects of a blood-thickening solution.

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'Mione?' She smiled. Between exams, the Department of Mysteries, Sirius' funeral and the end of the year, she had never gotten around to talking to Ron about not having a relationship. She was glad she hadn't. Away from Hogwarts, helping the Order, they had grown far closer. She was beginning to think she still had real feelings for him.

'Yes?' He leaned down to brush her mouth gently with his before saying:

'Wasn't that fun?' Hermione had to laugh. Quidditch was all they ever wanted to play, and this sunny day, after their morning cleaning ritual, she had been talked into joining them. Her abominable skills had resulted in much laughter as she had dropped the Quaffle nearly every time it was thrown her way. Bill and Charlie were in stitches, the twins hadn't been able to fly for laughing and Harry and Ron had just exchanged knowing looks.

'You hate talking about Quidditch cause it's the only thing me'n Ron are better at than you!' Harry declared, grinning so broadly his green eyes nearly closed.

Hermione chuckled as Ron slung his arm around her shoulders. 'Remember when I tried to learn about flying from a book, first year?'

'You what?' the twins had staggered up behind them in time to hear her, and they lost control all over again. 'Learn- from a- from a book!' Fred choked out. '*Quidditch!*'

'No, *flying*,' Hermione corrected with some dignity. This sent them into fresh gales of laughter.

'You're hired,' George panted as he caught his breath. 'I haven't laughed this hard in months.'

'Ever since we set that swamp for Umbridge, eh George?' This made everyone grin.

'Did you really sell half-off for people who would get rid of Umbridge?'

'Well...we hadn't really opened shop by the time you kicked her out yourselves, Hermione. If you hadn't been so clever, we could have made a lot more money,' George winked.

Hermione shivered. 'I wasn't clever. We got very lucky. Those centaurs wanted to kill us too. I hadn't even thought about their feelings...'

'Well, you weren't in Divination with Firenze,' Harry replied practically, 'how should you have known?'

'It was embarrassing,' she countered grimly, 'and to think I could have killed you, Harry.'

The mood over the group was now far from their intended fun. They mused to themselves, a pattern they had fallen into far too often of late. Ginny caught up to walk on Hermione's other side as she leaned against Ron. At the house, she disentangled herself from him to dart up the stairs.

'Oy! Where're you going?'

'To bottle potions for Madam Pomfrey. I'm all dirty now, so it won't matter. No use showering twice!' Ron groaned and Harry called:

'You and your potions! Snape would be proud!'

'Of the insufferable, know-it-all Gryffindor muggle-born? I doubt it!' Ron laughed, and she smiled, firmly suppressing the strange wave of longing that washed over her.

She pelted up the stairs and into her lab, eager to add the fresh unicorn hair delivered that morning. She checked her watch and took the remainder of the steps two at a time. It wasn't long now, the Quidditch had run longer than she had expected-

-Snape was already there, watching the potion simmer. She was grateful to see that the package remained unopened where she had placed it.

Snape lifted his head as she entered. She stopped short seeing him, standing in the

doorway, uncertain for the first time. Her hesitation gave him a painting to admire. Her face was glowing with exertion, her hair curling damp against her face reddened with wind. Her eyes still glittered brightly with laughter, and Snape understood, for the first time as he looked at her, that Hermione Granger was indeed physically beautiful. She looked like a queen at play, her utter command of the room rapidly overwhelming her momentary insecurity, stemming from her comfortability, her sense of her own right to be there. Now sure of herself, eyes taking in whatever he may have done, assessing damage to her work- she was breathtaking in her intensity.

But in spite of his thoughts, his tongue ran as smoothly as ever it did.

'I am glad you have arrived back- just barely- in time, Miss Granger. It would be a shame to see this potion spoiled due to incompetence. You have seven minutes to add the unicorn hair before the potion is ruined.'

'How would you know that, *sir*? This potion has never been made before,' she spat, ripping open the package as she spoke and carefully measuring the strands. She only needed six of seven inches apiece at this stage of the potion.

She cursed his arrival as she delicately counted the seconds, then added, the silvery-white hairs that seemed to glow with a life of their own. She had so been enjoying her day before he had interrupted with his snarky comments and unwarranted advice. She knew the potion was a precise process, and yes, she was much later back from Quidditch than she had intended... but his constant double treatment grated on her. He could not recommend her one instant and then treat her like an erring first year the next. Or rather, he could- and that very fact irked her.

'Because- something as valuable as unicorn hair is also something very delicate. And in now...five minutes time, it would have reacted badly with the dragonheart string and the sphinx saliva. As you already know, given your reading material.'

She snatched the book from under his nose.

'How dare you look through my things?' she hissed at him. His eyes narrowed, but she did not back down. This was not the dungeon he controlled, but the potions lab she did. Queen indeed.

'It was lying here open, Miss Granger. Surely you did not expect me to turn a blind eye to it- that is not how one master understands the technique and mind of another.'

Hermione opened her mouth for another blistering attack when she stopped. *'...one master understands the technique and mind of another.'* He had just told her that as far as he was concerned, she was his equal in talent- if certainly not in training. She was so surprised her mouth snapped shut without saying anything at all. It was some time before she managed:

'Would you have added it yourself if I had not been in time?'

'Yes. Your notes are-' his eyes flickered over them. Excellent was the truth- every step was clearly laid out, numbered and explained. He shook his head slightly as he reviewed the step just prior to this one. Dragonheart string. Where on earth had she gotten that idea from? '-sufficient. I was going to give you another four minutes and then do it myself- the potential for this potion is too great to allow pride or courtesy or carelessness



to interfere.'

There it was again. The insult that veiled the compliment just underneath it. 'Though I confess,' he continued, 'that the use of dragonheart string is puzzling. You must know

that it is a volatile substance?'

From professor to colleague. In the space of a breath, Snape had once again radically changed his persona. The unapproachable and foul Potions Professor had altered to the brilliant, curious and even-tempered Potions Master.

'I do, professor,' she replied respectfully. She Summoned a book to her and flipped it open. 'I believe you wrote a treatise on this very subject. I read it several times before deciding to add it. Volatile, yes, but also very strong. I believe it will give the strength that the taker needs, and also reacts well with most blood-thickening solutions.'

Snape arched an eyebrow as he skimmed the title of the essay. Yes, it was one of his, written while working for the Dark Lord more than seventeen years ago. He made an indistinct noise in his throat before saying, 'Your talent is wasted on a Gryffindor.'

'I happen to like it,' she replied in a brittle voice. 'Don't worry, sir,' she stuck her wand into the cauldron and stirred it seven times counter-clockwise. 'I do you no specific honor. You are one of the best in Europe, listed in the *Prophet's* top five masters. And *Witch Weekly* would probably kill to have an interview with you. Who am I to learn from if not the best?'

Snape listened to her speech with surprise, and snorted at the end of it. She glanced at him, to find him hastily erasing evidence of a smile. 'Have you been reading my mail, Miss Granger?'

'Why?'

'*Witch Weekly*.' At his half-snarl, half-exasperated sigh, they both laughed. Hermione found herself surprised again. It was a pleasant sound, not the nasty, low chuckle that students often elicited when he caught them red-handed.

'You can eliminate these two steps,' he told her after a moment's silence, looking at her notes for the potion and tapping the erring areas.

'How?'

'If you read what St. Mungo's published in their botany section two months ago, you will know that bubotuber pus and Mandrake juice can be substituted by a wash of basilica dissolved in Acromantula acid.'

'Yes, but three in five wizards is allergic to Acromantula acid, and basilica causes miscarriages and infertility in twenty percent of witches. Rather nasty side effects, I think.' She prodded the fire under the cauldron, smiled as the flames dimmed to a cool green and proceeded to her other potions.

'Touché,' he acknowledged her research quietly, without venom. 'It seems that being a know-it-all has its advantages.'

'It takes one to know one, Professor,' she said evenly as she finished with one bottle and stoppered it. She bit her lower lip. That last remark had been too flippant. He was still her teacher. But Snape was next to her, comment unnoticed, his hands helping fill and seal, much faster than hers from years of practice.

'The Headmaster hinted that I should move some of my simpler antidotes here, and you seem to have room, as long as we readjust,' he set down the vial he had filled and muttered something, flickered his wand, and the whole eastern wall *squelched* (Hermione could think of no other word for the fluid-like rippling of the white wall outwards) about ten feet further east, adding ample space for at least four more medium-sized cauldrons.

'I daresay you wouldn't object to sharing space with one of Europe's foremost Potions experts, certainly not one who *Witch Weekly* wants to interview?'

She glanced at him, wondering if he could possibly be referring to her ridiculous school girl crush on Gilderoy Lockhart- fives times winner of *Witch Weekly's* "Most Charming Smile Award"- in her second year.

He was mocking her. But he was also in earnest. She assented with a nod. 'As long as you don't interrupt my brewing,' she told him coolly.

Disclaimer: Everything here is the property of JKR, excepting the plot, which I have to take responsibility for. Unsettling Beginnings

‘Lord Voldemort has once again captured Harry Potter. He is in the Riddle House under heavy guard. Severus has informed me that they are waiting for Samhain to perform a spell that will not only kill Harry, but strengthen Voldemort in such a way that destroying him will be nearly impossible.’

Dumbledore sighed as he recounted what Snape had laid out in detail after his brief visit to Hermione. ‘Harry is kept prisoner by the Kin Ward, and the Raw Elemental Magic of Ang’guin Weyr.’

The silence that filled the Burrow’s normally noisy kitchen would have been at home in a grave. It was clear Dumbledore was asking for a plan. For help. But against Raw Magic there was no attack or counter.

‘Has anyone ever considered,’ Arthur Weasley piped up, ‘a Muggle plan of attack?’

‘When we would be fighting magic? Why on earth would that be effective?’ McGonagall snorted.

‘If we combined magic and Muggle tactics,’ Hermione said quietly, ‘they might be very effective indeed. The Shield Charm has no defense against bullets.’

‘But it will be impossible to get close to Potter in a Muggle manner,’ Snape countered. ‘The Wards on the door, and indeed, the house, will keep us away. This will have to be a quiet, inside job, not a battle.’

‘What do you recommend, Severus, considering that you know exactly what we have to deal with?’ Dumbledore asked.

‘I will have to take Potter out myself,’ his sallow face twisted with displeasure. ‘I can get through the Wards with the Dark Lord’s permission, the only way to break the Kin Ward. Headmaster, I will need you to be there, for I will hand Potter off to you- and then I will alert the Death Eaters to your presence.’

‘Why does it have to be Albus?’ McGonagall interrupted.

‘And why alert them at all?’ Moody growled. ‘They’ll figure it out sure enough.’

‘Because the only man who could possibly break the Wards set around Potter is the Headmaster,’ Snape explained coldly. ‘And as for the alert- the only reason I remain treading this world instead of long since darkening the doors of the other is because the Dark Lord truly believes me his. With precise timing I can free Potter and sound the alarm- and still no battle will ensue. Believe me, I have thought this through.’

‘And,’ he continued, his eyes flicking around the table, ‘there should be a small team guarding the avenue of escape.’

Alastor Moody was still glowering at the Potion’s Master mistrustfully. ‘I’ll lead that,’ he said in a tone that brooked no argument. Hermione was watching Professor McGonagall. She and Dumbledore seemed to be arguing silently. She had started to speak, his blue eyes cut her off, she nodded furiously and he shook his head ‘no’, discreetly waving a hand down the table to where Ron, Hermione and Ginny were seated. Eyes flashing, McGonagall nonetheless lost their unvoiced battle and sat back in her chair.

Snape’s eyes caught hers briefly as the exchange between the Headmaster and his Deputy Head finished. For an instant, they were soft. *He has exquisite eyes*, Hermione thought, barely remembering to keep her expression neutral as she looked at her Potions master. He blinked as if jolted, at seeing the smile in her gaze responding to him, glared at her coldly and quickly glanced away.

‘I will be part of Moody’s team,’ Hermione said suddenly.

‘No!’ chorused half a dozen voices. Snape, Dumbledore, Moody, both Weasleys and Shacklebolt were shaking their heads violently.

‘We should be there,’ Ron insisted.

‘Absolutely not, Ronald!’ his mother cried.

‘You could use the help,’ Hermione countered. ‘And Voldemort knows that we will go to great lengths to rescue Harry.’

‘No,’ Snape’s voice was flat and chilly. McGonagall and Dumbledore exchanged another look, this time in consternated accord. But Hermione felt the reason for the chill resonating in her mind: gut fear. He was frightened for her. But Hermione held his hard gaze unflinchingly. She could feel the iron will of his mind fighting with her own stubborn insistence in the back of her head- and knew from the slightly introspective look in his dark eyes that he had focused on the same thing. She forced herself to focus not on their strange connection but the business at hand.

‘Sir, I must respectfully say that if I am not allowed to go, I will get there on my own.’

‘Yep,’ Ron and Ginny chimed.

‘You wouldn’t dare!’ their mother gasped.

‘We are still in school, I know, and still not members of the Order. But Ron and Harry and I have done things that none of you have, and succeeded in tests where grown wizards have failed. Let us at least be a decoy. Give us Portkeys that we can activate that will take us straight to St. Mungo’s in case of disaster-’

‘You think you can Portkey in or out of where the Dark Lord lives?’ Snape laughed mirthlessly, and derision surged through their link, angering her. ‘No, Granger, I believe you have much to learn about defense. If you are allowed to go in there, you will have to fight your way out.’

‘She’s right, though, sir,’ Ginny was appealing to Dumbledore. ‘We would never leave Harry like that. We want to help. Like Hermione said, if we’re a decoy, then perhaps Harry can be gotten out with a minimum of notice. The...You-Know-Who, might even expect us to come.’

‘Then you would be walking straight into a trap that you have not the skill to fight yourselves out of,’ Snape snarled. ‘Leave this to the adults, Miss Weasley.’

‘Since you’ve been doing such a bang-up job!’ Ron snarled hotly.

Long silence. Snape rose slowly to his feet, the force of his anger flooding Hermione, she gripped the edge of the table in both hands to keep herself from being blown away by the maelstrom, her vision almost black in the storm.

‘Bang-up job, Mr. Weasley? As I recall, there were no adult members who decided to invade the Ministry of Magic last spring. And that, in fact, you would have all died then had the Order not saved your unworthy skins.’

‘Severus,’ Dumbledore growled. Snape resumed his seat, the raw edge of his fury at bay. Hermione’s sight returned and she sighed softly, releasing her grip on the table. ‘Mr. Weasley, I expect you to apologize to your professor- and everyone else at the table. Right now.’

Pale, mortified, Ron stood and mumbled his apology before the coldly blue eyes of the Headmaster and the entire assembly. Mrs. Weasley looked positively murderously embarrassed, and Mr. Weasley’s head was in his hands as Ron finished and sat down again slowly.

‘Now. To return to business,’ Dumbledore started.

‘I must second Severus. How can you be a decoy with any safety?’ McGonagall quickly jumped in, the question directed at Ginny.

‘We can’t,’ Ginny admitted after an uncomfortable pause.

‘The risk is unacceptable, Miss Weasley,’ Dumbledore said gently. ‘Though your desire to help Harry is well-placed.’

‘Now, if we’ve wasted enough time on this?’ Snape asked coldly, ‘We should probably continue planning the *actual* rescue?’

Hermione sat back as the conversation ebbed and flowed about her, breathing hard, her heart beat still soaring from the Snape-induced rage. What was this?

It was true that this summer had been different...that he had accorded her respect and even a twisted affection... but it was so much more than that. She could plainly feel his emotions, sometimes as strongly as if they were her own. And even his thoughts occasionally flickered in. And always, lurking, striking at random and hitching her breath in her throat, was the barely-concealed desire and admiration that flowed between them constantly, a beast leashed and tied, bound and ready to leap as soon as the line snapped.

She closed her eyes and willed her thoughts in another direction. She could not think this way now. They had to rescue Harry. And he, a skilled Legilimens, could doubtless hear her much better than she could hear him.

'You okay?' Ginny's hand was on her arm.

'I'm fine. Just, you know me, worrying about the essay I didn't finish,' Hermione lied glibly.

'Don't think about homework now!' Ginny urged. 'We need a plan.'

'We could go anyway,' Ron was saying in a whisper as they tucked their heads closer together.

'They've forbidden it, Ron. We could die.'

'They can't keep me from helping Harry, Hermione,' he muttered under his breath. He glowered at Dumbledore at the far end of the table. 'I'm going.'

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*Two and a half Months Prior...*

Hermione was awakened by the smell of something truly foul in the next room. Coughing in disgust, she waded through knee-high smoke the muddy green color of pea soup.

Snape peered at her from where he was standing over her cauldron, saw it was she and returned to the potion. Absently, he handed her the remainder of his breakfast roll. Her nose already closed to make



the odor more bearable, Hermione stuffed the bread into her mouth with a muffled thanks and swallowed her first bite before:

'What caused the smoke, professor?'

'An unfortunate side effect of adding the mushrooms ten minutes too soon,' he sighed. 'It doesn't damage or diminish the results, but I fear this shack may smell for the rest of the day.'

'Shack! I'll give- ugg,' behind them, Ginny was gagging as she stood, clinging to the doorframe separating her room with Hermione from the impromptu potions laboratory.

'Ginny, I'm so sorry!' Hermione started to cross quickly, and realized that she would have to content herself with slogging. The smoke was thick as mud. 'We didn't mean to wake you!'

'Perhaps, if you would mind your own business and shut the door, Miss Weasley, you would find that the smell would lessen,' Snape told her pointedly.

She glowered at him and, before Hermione was more than halfway there, slammed the door as well as she could, stopping the tide of billowing smoke from escaping. Hermione turned around, her hands on her hips as she glared at Snape. But he was already back at the potion. And he was her teacher, regardless of his cruelty, she could not correct him.

'Marble or quartz, Miss Granger?' he asked her suddenly. His voice was the deep, pleasant timbre that Hermione had come to associate with his relatively stress-free lab work. She shook her head in exasperation. His nastiness was so commonplace that he himself had started to ignore it.

'Quartz, professor,' she replied immediately. 'Marble only adds stubbornness- something members of the Order do *not* need.'

'No indeed,' he agreed. 'In fact, most of them could do with a great deal less when it comes to listening to their elders and betters.' He shot her a carefully measured glance.

She kept her face blank. He wasn't the only one who could be elusive and controlled.

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'What's going on, mate?' Harry asked, looking up from his Defense Against the Dark Arts essay. He had discovered that with Voldemort abroad, he preferred to keep himself on top of his studies. You never knew what might be useful and when.

'I dunno, Harry.'

'What'd she do this time?' Harry asked quietly. Ron looked guilty.

'Is it that obvious?'

'Yeah. Nothing makes you sulk like Hermione,' Harry said sagely. 'What happened?'

'Nothing!' Ron practically exploded. 'Nothing at all! I guess I expected...I have to make all the moves, it's like...it's like she doesn't care, Harry, doesn't care whether it happens or not.'

'She cares about you, Ron.'

'No more than she cares about you. Or Ginny.'

Harry opened his mouth to reassure Ron and stopped. He was not in the habit of lying to his friends, and the truth was that since Hermione had started brewing potions, she seemed to be gifted with a half-adult life, an involvement in the Order denied to him, to Ron, to Ginny. Even for Hermione, she was more...grown up. Harder to tease, harder to get to have fun. Her small potions lab, now significantly larger after Snape's additions, had taken the place of her free time. Harry could, and did, appreciate that what she was doing was necessary for the Order- but it made Ron a lot harder to be best friends with.

'See- you know it's true,' Ron accused.

'You're right. She seems different. For awhile I thought you were really going well there, you know, when you came, and when I first got here a couple weeks ago.'

'I thought so too. And then- she stopped. And now I feel like...' he cast around for an appropriate metaphor, 'I feel like an afterthought. Something, or someone, she does when she doesn't have more pressing business and that's...that's not really enough, you know?'

'Yeah,' Harry agreed, thinking privately that he had no idea what Ron meant. He hadn't really ever dated Cho- they'd kissed a couple times, been to Hogsmeade that one fantastically disastrous occasion, his stomach had lurched at the sight of her. But he did know that it had been nothing like Ron's feelings for Hermione.

'What are you going to do about it?'

'I guess I'll have to talk to her,' Ron said. Harry thought it would probably take his friend much more than frustration to talk to Hermione- Ron was scared of losing her, and wouldn't rush the encounter as long as Hermione was content to wait.

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Ron threw open the door to Hermione's room a few days later, feeling slightly awkward. He just hadn't found the right time yet to really talk to her. It didn't help that she was always buried, just like now, in a potions book.

'Mum wants you to help with dinner.'

'All right,' she agreed. He started across the room to kiss her, and wrinkled his nose when he got too close.

'You smell!'

'Well- *that's* a winning line,' Ginny said from where she had materialized behind him. 'Thanks for explaining your enormous success with women.'

'I didn't-' Ron blushed, ears redder than his hair. 'What I meant- you smell like potions and smoke, Hermione.'

'I know. Professor Snape moved a cauldron of Skele-gro here,' she absently marked the place in her book, stretching a little as she rose. 'It stinks like nothing else- I think the foulness of the smell is matched only by the flavor.'

'RONALD!'

'I think we'd better go.' Ron, Hermione and Ginny hurried down the stairs.

'There they are!' Fred and George were cleaning a cauldron- without magic. Every bit

of magic from every witch and wizard was preserved. Hermione had not known that doing even simple magic could be exhausting, but using magic all day long and then having to perform huge spells without warning left everyone dangerously tired. So, six days of the week they conserved their energy for naught. But it was the seventh day, when one or more members of Order arrived just this side of death, that they guarded against and dreaded.

'Off snogging when we've been working like house elves?!' they roared.

'I don't think anyone's been snogging,' Mrs. Weasley snapped at the twins. 'They hardly had enough time. And working like house elves! What would you two know?' The twins grinned evilly, and Hermione grinned back in spite of Ron's scowl. The twins liked her. All the Weasleys liked her.

She crossed to Mrs. Weasley's side and began preparing carrots. The old fashioned way.

Halfway through, she uttered a clipped cry, and fainted.

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'Merlin, I didn't even mean for it to hit that hard.'

'You did what you had to, Severus understands.'

'I don't give a damn whether he understands, Dumbledore, we need him to *live*,' Kingsley Shacklebolt's voice echoed deeply in the entrance to the Burrow. It was shaking.

'He'll live.'

Dumbledore looked up to see no fewer than seven faces peering down at him from various levels and landings. The worry in his voice stressed by the absolute calm of his delivery he said: 'Alert the infirmary. Poppy will need to know that he is dying.'

For an instant, they stood stunned, and then Ginny started running upstairs, wondering at Dumbledore's demeanor as he pronounced a man- one of his staff- dying. 'Professor Snape is here,' she panted, throwing the door open wide, 'and he's hurt. Badly. He's dying.'

'Thank you, dear,' Pomfrey replied quietly. She gazed at the four beds, all of them full, each member of the Order injured gravely. They had learned not to allow their members to use St. Mungo's after one of them had been killed in there by a Death Eater.

'See if you can move Mr. Mikael's,' she whispered to Ginny. Ginny conjured a stretcher charm and started pushing him out the door.

'Where?'

'Put him in your parents room. They won't mind, and he'll probably wake up tomorrow.'

Ginny went to deliver him.

Dumbledore and Shacklebolt brought Snape into the infirmary carefully.

Madam Pomfrey slapped her hands to her mouth as she looked at him. He already looked dead.

'Dumbledore!' Her wand was already running over his body, magic pulsing from it. 'Heartbeat unstable, lung damage, severe internal

bleeding from his stomach, small intestine, liver, right kidney...' Her eyes were large and panicked as she raised them to gaze into Dumbledore's blue ones.

'I can't. I've used too much magic today. I haven't the strength, Headmaster. Have you?'

Dumbledore didn't even shake his head. Shacklebolt saw the glimmer of indecision replaced quickly and knew that old wizard had thought of something else.

'Kingsley, kindly bring me Hermione Granger. Hurry!'

'She fainted!' Madam Pomfrey told him quickly. 'Molly put her to bed in her room. She's in no condition-'

'Has she used any magic today?' At a shake from the nurse's head, he ordered:

'Go. Wake her if you must.' The large Auror tore down the stairs, careening into Hermione's room on the second floor. She was awake, but her breathing was shallow, as

though it took great effort.

'We need you upstairs,' he told her hastily. Hermione rose unsteadily, swaying as she tried to rise. Kingsley was at her side and lifted her in his arms, taking the steps two at a time back to the hospital.

'Miss Granger,' Dumbledore's eyes looked tired, but he nodded to Snape as Hermione's feet hit the floor of the attic. 'I believe you know what to do.'

And she did. As on the day in McGonagall's office, fear completely took her mind. It also took the pain and her weakness. She crossed to him in several large steps and placed her hands directly on his torso flinching as her fingers encountered blood, broken ribs and the draining weakness that rolled over her. Taking a deep breath, she summoned her own fading strength and began murmuring spells. Light shimmered around them like a heat wave, and the air thrummed, an irregular tattoo filling the silence.

‘What...?’

‘You’re hearing his heart beat,’ Dumbledore told Kingsley softly. A minute passed. Two. Finally it was beginning to smooth out, the beats becoming faintly regular, and then gathering strength.

Dumbledore’s hair stood on end, white strands slowly, and then rapidly, rising straight out in clumps. The magic pulsing from Hermione into Snape was so strong that his long white hair and beard spiked out in all directions.

‘Miss Granger, I believe that’s enough,’ he said. She did not respond. Her hands remained planted on his chest, splayed and gripping as though she were holding on for her life. ‘Miss Granger! Hermione!’ he tried. ‘Kingsley, get her away from him!’

‘What is she doing?’ Kingsley asked as he hastily obeyed. But magic continued to flow palpably from her hands, silver, green and blue light rushing into Snape’s body even as Kingsley pulled her forcefully away.

Pomfrey was staring. ‘My God.’ Her eyes snapped to Dumbledore. ‘I have never seen an untrained witch do that. She doesn’t have that gift with any of my other patients.’

‘No. She doesn’t,’ Dumbledore replied in a tone that told everyone he wasn’t going to explain.

Hermione sagged against Kingsley. The unearthly light had stopped rushing from her and she looked extremely pale, the blue veins in her face so bright they seemed to glow with a light of their own.

‘Let me go,’ she murmured, stirring. ‘I can help.’

Dumbledore bent to whisper: ‘Hermione, I know how you feel. But if you heal Severus that way, you are going to kill yourself.’

‘His heart is stable, lungs are stable...Dumbledore, he’s safe!’ Pomfrey called.

‘That’s because Hermione’s magic affected the most important things first,’ he called over his shoulder.

‘I applaud your efforts, Hermione, I do. And I am grateful to you now for saving his life. But had I let you, you would have thrown your life-force into him, and we need you.’ Dumbledore leaned closer to her and said, so softly that no one else could hear:

‘He needs you.’



'Ronald and Virginia, come here please,' Mrs. Weasley snapped as the meeting broke up. Ron had silently seethed next to Hermione the whole time, but he and Ginny had been rapidly devising a plan. They would help rescue Harry- but they had no intention of dying to do it.

'Neville and Luna'll want to be in on it.'

'We should include Dean and Seamus- they're good at defense too,' Hermione had muttered. She saw Snape watching them, his eyes narrowed. But she had shaken her head at him, defended her mind and he had minded the conversation.

'Severus, you can take Ms. Granger back to Hogwarts,' Dumbledore told him pleasantly. 'Minerva and I will wait for Mrs. Weasley to have a quick word with her children.'

'I'll be in my room if I'm not in Dumbledore's office,' Hermione murmured to Ginny. 'Come get me when you get back.'

Ginny nodded. Hermione approached Snape as he glowered at her. 'If you are done socializing, Miss Granger?' His voice was its usual freezing temperature.

'I am, professor,' she murmured, clenching her jaw. He handed her the slip of parchment and they disappeared out of the crowded kitchen, coming to the silence of Dumbledore's office.

She lifted her gaze to look at him, only to find his black eyes fixed on her in a solemn, almost reverential way.

'Don't do that,' she whispered. He bit back his automatic reply, *Don't do what?* He could not engage in banter with the girl. The last time those had been the rules of the game...

'Do not think of going yourself.' She withdrew, pulling away from him. His hand snapped out, closing on her arm, spinning her to face him. His gasp mirrored her clipped cry. Longing and fear engulfed him, submerging her, his fear of losing her, hers of finding him dead-

And in the back of his mind, unfolding like a white blossom, hope flared and gently pressed tendrils outward, wrapping the fear, lighting

the dark. *Hermione's mind*, he realized, wondering at it. It was an emotion so purely innocent that his fright peeled away as she-

'No,' he ordered, shaking his head and ripping his hand away from her arm. Hermione was staring at him.

'Sir,' she groped for the language she needed, only to find that it wasn't necessary. So close his breath still whispered across her forehead, her seething confusion echoed in him, raw passion flowing evenly from source to source without touch.

'Be silent,' he commanded raggedly. But his eyes focused on her completely, narrowed as he gave his next instruction.

'You cannot endanger yourself. Or Potter. Or the rest of us...Miss Granger, do you understand that all of us could suffer if you decide to play hero? We don't have time for you to adopt a Potter complex in his absence!'

Hermione bit her lower lip, but she could not lie to this man, nor would she back away. 'I must, professor. We will not leave him to face his fate alone. We will be careful,' she offered softly.

'You cannot be careful. You can only be lucky.'

*Nevertheless*, he heard the thought clearly. The storm gathered on his face and she quickly murmured, 'May I leave, sir?'

'Miss Granger-' But she was at the door, handle turning when she stopped to give him a querying look. 'Get out,' he said curtly, waving his hand in dismissal. She vanished, the door closing with a *snick* in her wake.

It had nearly killed him to see her after the battle in Diagon Alley. How much worse could it be if she attacked the viper's nest?

And with this connection of mind and body, what would happen if one of them died?

Two and a half months prior...

Hermione fought her instinct to reel away from the Headmaster, helped by Kingsley's broad frame at her back. *'He needs you.'* What did that mean? What did Dumbledore know?

In the Headmaster's gaze, Hermione saw that he knew more than she did, and certainly more than she wanted anyone to know. For the first time, he scared her. 'They need my help in the kitchen, I'm sure,' she stammered, and found the strength in her legs to flee down the stairs to the comparative sanity of the kitchen, where there was no Dumbledore to continue confusing her.

*'He needs you.'*

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'Dear?' Molly Weasley helped Hermione sit down after she tore back into the kitchen. She had fainted, and she felt weak and dizzy now from the healing.

'You're pale as death, what ever happened, Hermione?' Mrs. Weasley was pouring tea, considered the bottle of firewhiskey, shrugged and added a tablespoon. 'Drink this, I'll have no argument. A little firewhiskey can do a world of good.'

Hermione drank and struggled not to splutter. The tea was hot on her tongue, the whiskey burned down her throat, but it was a steady burning, a relaxing one.

'Nothing, I just remembered that I needed to help and I was so embarrassed at fainting like that,' she murmured. Mrs. Weasley pursed her lips. Hermione could easily see that she didn't believe her. It wasn't a very believable lie. But she also didn't press.

'Well, if you want to talk any more about it, I'll listen,' she said softly. 'You sit and finish that and if you're well afterwards maybe you can set the table.' Hermione nodded and took another sip of tea.

But now, as her exhaustion began to ebb and the tea soothed her nerves, another curiosity flickered to life. Madam Pomfrey knew that

she didn't have that kind of healing power with anyone else. Why Snape? And it was clear that not only McGonagall, but Dumbledore, knew. He had her dragged from her bed after a fainting spell to perform the necessary task.

And come to that...it wasn't just healing. She wrinkled her forehead, frowning. She had felt a great pain on her date with Ron, and the next day she had healed Snape when he was in an abominable condition. This time, she had fainted and he had arrived not more than a few minutes later, dying.

*He needs you.* Anger surged in her powerfully, and she understood, for the first time, Harry's resentment with Dumbledore's constant meddling, a spider testing and pulling the strings of his web. Benevolent and caring the Headmaster undeniably was- and sincerely so...but he was also a general. And as such used the best of his soldiers' talents as he needed to... She was beginning to wish she had not run from the infirmary like a child, but asked Dumbledore what he knew.

*This sounds like a binding spell,* she thought grimly. Her excessively sensitive ability while healing, the effects of his escapades manifesting in her body...it wasn't something she had studied deeply, but she did remember that the most common use of them in modern times had to do with marriage. She made a mental note to ask Dumbledore when he came down. If he knew so much, he could tell her what concerned her.

The table was laid and everyone was eating when Madam Pomfrey slowly descended the stairs and ladled soup into her bowl. 'Is Professor Dumbledore still here?' Hermione asked, halfway out of her chair by the time she finished the question.

'Oh no. He left after making sure Severus would survive.' Hermione sighed and slumped back down. The Headmaster had probably known that she would want to talk to him, and escaped quickly on purpose. It was just like him to play hooky when he was wanted by a student in a potentially awkward situation.

'You mean he's going to?' Ron sounded sincerely disappointed, which earned him scowls from his mother and Hermione.

'I will need someone to watch over Professor Snape,' Madam Pomfrey said, ignoring Ron. 'He's in one of the extra rooms.'

'By himself? And here I thought we were overcrowded,' Fred muttered.

'You know that most people in the Order do not know that Professor Snape has joined us,' Mrs. Weasley told her son severely. 'It's part of keeping him alive.'

'Wouldn't do to let more than the two dozen people who already know in on the "secret", would it?' George said, rolling his eyes.

'I only need someone to bring him his meals and check up on him every hour or so. The worst is over and he is an exceedingly tough and undemanding patient- hardly a difficult job,' Madam Pomfrey said in exasperation. 'Surely one of you could help?' A pin could have been heard to drop, then Hermione, with the feeling that she was about to jump off a cliff, said:

'I'll do it.' Gapes came from all assembled except Mrs. Weasley, who beamed at her. Madam Pomfrey gave her a quick look, then put down her soup and gestured for Hermione to follow her out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

'You are not to heal him in any way, Miss Granger, do you understand? I don't quite know what to make of this peculiar connection, but if one thing is clear, it exhausts you, and I won't have that. He will heal- slowly, but surely, and it's a good idea for him to rest for a few days anyway. Is that perfectly clear?'

Hermione sighed. How could she explain that she didn't control it? That it was an urge more powerful than hunger or exhaustion? Probably brought on by an outside influence? But it was clear that "no" was not allowed to be her answer. 'Yes.'

Snape was awake when they entered, bandaged and bruised, but very much alive. 'Severus, Miss Granger is going to take care of you for a few days while you heal.'

His face twisted in disgust. 'Charming,' he spat. 'You will find I do not take much coddling, a welcome change after Potter and Weasley, I daresay.'

*Leopards never change their spots*, Hermione thought of her mother's phrase. She could not keep her stomach from sinking with disappointment that their strangely satisfying intellectual relationship had vanished, leaving her a student with only the professor who hated her.

'I'll bring your food,' Madam Pomfrey told him, ignoring his customary bad temper. She left, and Hermione sat in the chair. She watched Snape struggle to move before asking:

'What's wrong, sir?'

'I can't sit up easily, Granger, what does it look like?' he snarled in frustration. She stood and hesitantly eased her hands behind his back, pushing him upward and trying to move the pillows into the right position at the same time. She could feel his abject weakness- and a startlingly strong frustration and self-disgust- through her hands, and, absurdly, tears rose to her eyes.

She shook her head to clear them. He helped weakly with his arms. 'No more miracle

healing?' he asked. It was meant to be biting, but had the edge of desperation to dissipate the sarcasm.

'I have been forbidden to heal you. By Professor Dumbledore. He stopped me from healing you completely in the infirmary, sir.'

She was half seated on the bed by the time he was sitting upright and she could remove her hands. She did so quickly. Exhausted, pale like death and in ill temper, he still made

her stomach dance in a way that she could only wish Ron did.

Snape did not know whether to be sorry or glad when she moved away from him. Her hands alone seemed to strengthen him, even when no magic flowed from them.

*What a wonderfully romantic notion*, he thought, his mental voice hard, *I'm sure that's the truth.*

Madam Pomfrey re-entered with the food and handed it to Snape on a tray before bustling out again. He stared at it for a moment before willing himself to pick up the spoon.

It shook so hard in his hand that Hermione was sure he would never get it all the way to his mouth without putting the soup everywhere.

'Wait, sir. If it's not too objectionable...?' She took the spoon from him and filled it, taking it slowly to his mouth. He glared at her, his thin lips remaining stiffly closed.

'You cannot lift the spoon yourself,' she whispered, biting her lip. 'Or perhaps,' she put the spoon back in the soup as a horrible thought occurred to her. Reformed or not, the man had been a Death Eater.

'Perhaps you do not want a *Mudblood*,' she stressed the word, 'feeding it to you? Should I get Ginny?'

'No!' he found the strength to reach forward, snatching at her wrist as she stood, managing to catch it limply. If she wanted to, she could jerk away.

'No. I...I simply...I have not been spoon-fed since infancy, and have no wish to resume. However, it does seem to be the only way that I can eat right now.' He purposefully gentled his voice. There was no one else here who would care for him. Usually this was hardly relevant, but now he needed it, needed the strength. He could not afford to alienate her. He did not *want* to alienate her- he had come to accept, almost enjoy, the kinship of her company in his lab. And he would not, for all the world, have her think that he hated Muggle-borns. Hated her.

He did not tell her that there were all kinds of ways to torture and degrade a human being. He had developed one when he was younger, forcing prisoners to eat off the floor, or make them eat from another's hand- literally. The method had earned favor with the Dark Lord as it had produced mental effects that proved a longer lasting confessor and persuader than physical rigors. Such a direct parallel

was humiliating at best, and he thanked all his stars that teaching at Hogwarts kept him from having to use it now.

The unsettling feeling of being the center of her gaze pulled him out of his thoughts and back to the bed. 'I will eat,' he told her quietly, looking pointedly at the spoon.

Hermione picked it up again, placed herself on the edge of the bed and starting to spoon soup into his obediently opened mouth.

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'That took forever!' Ron said when she came down the stairs.

'He takes a long time to eat now,' Hermione said distantly, 'and you weren't going to help.'

Ron shook his head violently. 'It's amazing, Hermione, that you like to.'

'I don't like to,' she instantly countered, hearing the just-too-sharp defensiveness in her voice and wincing, 'It just has to get done. And your mum's too busy and you and Harry aren't going to do it. And the twins? Play nursemaid? I don't think so. So I have to do it. We can't let him die, not after all he's done for us.'

'Well, mum doesn't need us for awhile. Want to go out somewhere for once?' Ron asked hopefully.

Hermione hesitated. All her doubts about Ron had been so nicely at bay until Snape had started working in the lab with her. Now...she didn't know.

*But you pushed through it before, she thought firmly. You pushed through and now you're glad you did- he'll get better and leave and you can forget about him again.*

*But what, that section of her mind insisted on having its say, about a binding spell? After all, they don't just vanish. And your abilities around him are unnatural...*



This *isn't a story older than Time itself*, Snape thought disparagingly, waiting for Hermione to come with his lunch. Today, his third day in bed, he thought he would be able to feed himself.

*Young man- or not-so-young-man, badly injured, decides to develop a passion for his nurse.* He rolled his eyes at the thought. But he had been healed by a dozen or more women in his life, Death Eaters, members of the Order, Madam Pomfrey. He was a good patient, a quick healer and a quiet man in the hospital. He had always healed and left, without notice and mostly without care.

And...it wasn't the healing. He had started enjoying her company when he had seen her obvious interest in his private laboratory, an interest unrelated to politics or power or sex, an interest in the subject itself, rare in a student. And it had continued through their few afternoons here, peacefully brewing or engaging in their verbal sparring that was more dance than violence.

'Professor?' He straightened himself, sitting up in the bed. He struggled not to drop his

eyes in embarrassment when she entered. Two days in bed had left him with nothing to do and far too much to think about. She had occupied him thoroughly, he had not had much success with focusing on the potions he was working on. Inevitably, mentally testing the recipes he wanted to try brought him back to the exploding cauldron, and rolling across the dungeon with her in his arms.

'Good afternoon, Miss Granger,' he greeted her coolly.

She set the tray on the bed, and then sat on top of the comforter next to him, preparing herself to feed him again. She reached for the fork to break the first bit off, and he stopped her.

'I believe my hands are steady enough today. You might have asked.' But his voice, while chilled, lacked heart in the venom, and her left hand remained captured in his as he focused on getting the steak and kidney pie from his plate to his mouth.

When he had finished a slow forty-five minutes later, he set down the fork, sighing. 'That took entirely too much effort,' he confessed.

She laughed. He scowled at her, but said nothing. She reached to pick up the tray, and felt her hand- previously forgotten- still clasped with his. Their fingers tensed. It was too late not to acknowledge it. Neither could deny it, or the admissions it revealed as Hermione slipped her fingers out of his and lifted the tray.

'I will bring you dinner,' she said quietly. 'Do you want anything before then?'

*Your company.* 'Books, parchment. Potions don't brew themselves, Miss Granger.'

She tilted her head in a nod and left, closing the door behind her. She fought to keep her steps steady as she walked down the stairs with the empty tray.

What was she going to say to Ron?

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'Can we come with you? You shouldn't have to do the job by yourself,' Ginny asked as Hermione prepared to take dinner to Snape. 'You've been a really good sport.' Ginny Summoned a tray, earning a glare from her mother, and started loading her dinner on as well.

'I'll come with you.'

Hermione thought about how Snape had looked when they had been staring at each other over their clasped hands. He would not be pleased about the intrusion. She wasn't sure she was pleased. But it would keep her safe. And honest. And Ron...

'Thanks, Ginny,' she smiled at the younger girl warmly, 'the company will be nice.'

Snape almost smiled to see Hermione walking in, and quickly scowled when he saw Ginny on her heels. Of all the things...he saw

Hermione's eyes sparkling and put it all together. She knew he would be displeased. She was teasing him.

A feeling of forlorn loneliness swept over him. No one had dared to tease him for many years. Even Albus Dumbledore, his third and most powerful father, did not tease him. And here was this student who, two months ago, he would have sworn he hated, with a brilliant light in her brown eyes because she was treating him like a friend.

Something human in Snape awoke, sorrow and memories of his sister's ringing laugh fluttered through his mind. His only real emotion had been self-loathing for so long it had incorporated itself into his very being. For something so trivial to break his carefully composed defenses... He quickly studied his hands, pulling back together his composure. Enchanting though it was for Granger to tease him, the Weasley girl certainly could not see.

And speaking of Weasley...wasn't Granger dating him?

'Dinner,' Hermione said perfunctorily, putting it down on his lap. For the first time, she did not sit on the bed with him, but in a chair so that she could talk to Ginny. He felt that he somehow missed her warmth, and her presence, so near to him usually, and instantly felt foolish for doing so.

And he was weaker. It took him nearly twice as long to eat dinner as lunch because of his shaking hands. Perhaps the girl at his side *did* lend him her strength. Fanciful, but certainly not impossible. He made a mental note to look up the effects of the healer's presence on the patient.

Hermione noticed his trouble and rose when she was done eating, bending over to whisper in his ear, 'Do you want my help? Are you weaker this evening?'

'No,' he snapped quietly. 'I do not require your help.'

'I was only offering,' she replied sharply.

Ginny frowned at them, hearing only Hermione's last sentence. 'Are you all right? Do you need help?' she asked uncertainly.

‘No, Miss Weasley, as I was just explaining to Granger,’ Snape said through a tightly clenched jaw, ‘I am fine. In fact, I wish to be alone.’

‘That’s fine with us, *sir*.’ Hermione rose abruptly, carrying her now-empty tray. Ginny stood with her. ‘Ring the bell,’ Hermione jerked her head at the small bell sitting on the bedside table, ‘when you’re done and we can clear it.’

They stalked out. Severus shook his head, stared at his hands as he continued the painfully slow process of eating on his own. He had found that while he wanted to see her, Granger’s presence with the Weasley girl had thrown him into a black temper and he’d rather not suffer either of them.

He spooned soup into his mouth reflectively, looking at the door that Granger had just barely managed not to slam. He knew that it no longer did him any good to internally deny himself, and he would not waste his energy so. He was a practical man, and such impractical feelings had dangers. It did no good to deny their existence and only by acknowledging them could he keep himself alert to their intrusion. *And it would be nice not to feel guilt when I think of her.*

*But what about her?* He did not need to read her mind to know that she was not unaffected by him. Her healing power alone indicated that something was amiss. But it made no sense. It was not the violent lust of a Love Potion, nor was it the irresistible urge of a charm or enchantment...it was a slow, natural feeling, one of reality rather than the surreal, the magic-induced.

But there was nothing they could do. A heart encased in ice could remain so, he knew. And his emotions were so layered that the Dark Lord and his Legilimens could not have unwrapped them. He finished the soup and tentatively rang the bell, hoping that it would be Granger alone that walked through the door, knowing that he should not wish it.

It was the Weasley girl. ‘You’re finished sir?’ He waved at the tray, glowering at her. She hurried forward, grabbed it and darted out.

*Granger isn't frightened of me*, he realized involuntarily. Another pang of loneliness swept through him, leaving him almost breathless in it's wake.

'Professor?' Hermione was at the door, her hands clasped loosely in front of her. 'Do you need anything else? Ginny said she forgot to ask you.'

Snape shook his head, his voice not ready to speak. Hermione had never seen a grown man look so completely vulnerable- almost lost. Something stirred in her, and she nearly asked him. What had he been thinking about?

'If you do...ring the bell?' Her voice was tentative, a question, not a command.

Snape locked away his self-pity and faced her, the vulnerability gone, his usual mask sliding over it like the second skin that it was. 'Thank you, Miss Granger. But I believe I have my books. There is nothing else I require.'

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Hermione heard rustling as she passed Snape's room at midnight. She knocked at the door, was about to enter, when Snape called, 'Come.'

She opened the door to find him seated bolt upright, his wand steadily pointed at her. The look in his black eyes chilled her to the bone, even if they were behind his reading spectacles. She had no doubt that, had she been the wrong person, he would have killed her on the spot.

'Professor? Are you all right?'

He shook his head as if banishing sleep from his eyes- the disturbingly hard look vanished- and set down his wand, replying, 'I believe I am simply a restless sleeper, Miss Granger, and have decided to spend some time working. You need not worry.'

'It is my duty to worry about you,' she responded, her voice cold enough to sting. *My duty...* was that all she felt? 'Do you need anything?'

'Perhaps...' once again, the look of vulnerability crossed his face, taking a decade out of the world-weary, cynical eyes. 'Perhaps, if you would read this, while I write? There are some notes I was taking on Augustus Pye's new stock of Closed Ward Potions. It will go much faster with two people, and perhaps we could begin trials sooner.' It was a test. Would she stay?

She sighed. She was tired. But he seldom asked for any help, and she had offered months ago, so she agreed, 'I could do that.' She crossed to the bed, perched on the edge in her normal place and took the papers.

The document he handed her was one of thick parchment, written messily, but with painstaking care- as if the handwriting had tried its best to order itself into legibility.

She began to read, at first sitting up, then gradually relaxing into the pillows beside him. Inches they were both aware of separated them as Hermione read in a low voice and Snape's quill scratched against the parchment.

Eventually, her voice faltered, tired. It was after one. They looked at each other. Hermione thought she had never been so attuned to another person in the entirety of her life, in the length of his body in the bed, in how far away he was, in the heat that she could feel radiating from him.

'Are you tired?'

'A little.'

'Do you wish to sleep?' Hermione shook her head at the slight contempt in his voice. If this was a contest of wills, she would win.

'Not if you want me here to help you, sir,' she was looking at him levelly, and dark brown and black eyes tried to read one another through his lenses.

'Here,' he thrust the quill and parchment at her, 'I will read, and tell you what it is I want you to record. You can rest your voice.' He shoved his reading glasses up on his nose and started to read, stopping to make side notes that she scribbled hastily.

He looked so different. Out of the Potions classroom and lab, his hair was soft and long, no longer greasy, and with the glasses he looked like a scholar. His voice rose and fell softly, not the hard, intimidating sound of a professor but the tones of a human being.

He sank lower and lower in the pillows as he read, more laying than sitting, his voice beginning to slur with exhaustion until it dripped into mumbles and finally stopped. His chest rose and fell easily, rhythmically. He was asleep.

She smiled. She had won. She removed the papers from his hands and set them on the

table along with the parchment she had been recording on. She moved a little, starting to rise from where her back was aching, trying not to stir him to wakefulness as she reached forward to take the glasses off his nose...

He flipped over, seizing her wrist, his eyes snapping open. Their blackness held no mercy, it was the same cold look that had imbued his features when she had knocked on the door. The exhaustion he felt was no longer echoed in his eyes, and the hand clenching her bones together had no trace of weakness.

'Professor,' she murmured in a small voice, 'Professor it's me, Hermione Granger...' She had thought his rages and sarcasm were frightening, but these eyes were those of a silent, professional killer. A deadly man without a glimmer of conscience.

His eyes cleared as he recognized her, and through the sleepiness that instantly re-claimed them she saw, no...*felt*, barely flitting through the hand on her wrist, a haze of new emotions...astonishment and-what else? He sighed and closed his eyes again, allowing her to slide out of his loosened grip and put his glasses on the bedside table.

*His eyelashes are beautiful*, she thought as she stood, legs trembling. They were long, black curves that cast wispy shadows on his face in the candlelight. Her hand impulsively reached out, and she halted herself. He was a murderer. She had seen it in his eyes.

*You already knew that. You knew he killed for Voldemort*, she reminded herself. But the way he moved...so quickly, like a snake striking, ready to kill at being wakened. Somehow, it had never been real to her, the crimes he must have done, and still committed, in the service of his dark lord. She had never thought of him as a killer. Cruel and sarcastic, demanding and perfectionistic- she had always thought of him as essentially a good man, not prone to the killing or torture he had to have done...

But like all men, he looked peaceful when he slept, sallow cheeks smooth, brow relaxed, if lined from years of scowling, mouth loose.

Hermione shivered at the direction her thoughts were taking her and quickly left the

room, almost running for the familiarity of the room she shared with Ginny.



## Dangerous Games

'They can't keep me from going. Soon as I get word, when they let something slip...' Ron was whispering over Hermione to Dean in their Defense Against the Dark Arts lesson, Harry's seat noticeably empty in their N.E.W.T.s level class.

'Tell us, will you? Maybe we can help,' Dean was replying eagerly.

'It's very dangerous,' Hermione interjected. 'We need to have as few people coming with us-'

'Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Thomas. I was under the impression that you were choosing to take this course.' Snape's voice was ice as it doused the conversation. 'I was not aware that I paired any partners today? I was also operating on the assumption that by this level of your education you could read. Tell me, Miss Granger, what does your syllabus say?'

'That we are not permitted to talk,' Hermione said clearly, 'and that if we do so, you will take it as an attempt to cheat, sir.' All eyes were on her. But under the glower she could feel warmth and amusement as well as the deep, rippling fear that she would go. His glares and coldness paled in comparison to the rich emotions flowing under the mask.

'Well, well. Being a know-it-all does have its perks. Thirty points from Gryffindor, and you will each receive only half credit for this potion. I expect Mr. Thomas and Mr. Weasley in my office tonight for detention.'

'Sir, we weren't even talking about the potion-' Dean quailed under the glare that Snape gave him.

'Even worse. Choosing to fill your time with trash outside of my class is not my concern. But in my class, it is a transgression. Make it forty points from Gryffindor. Get back to work.'

'Why didn't you get a detention?' Ron asked Hermione sourly.

Hermione smiled to herself as she experimentally flicked her wand. Snape had determined after threatening her with detention earlier this year that he would never give her one. It was too easy to slip, too easy to give too much, as it had been this summer. A swoop of quiet yearning filled her throat, making it difficult to speak for a moment.

‘Because I can cast the spell without cheating, and he knows it,’ she replied with forced cheerfulness as she swished her wand and generated a perfect Shield Charm.

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*Two Months Prior...*

Hermione entered with his breakfast, to see him standing and dressed, buttoning his robe sleeves.

‘You are well, Professor.’ It was not a question.

‘I am. Thank you for your help this past week,’ he said smoothly. ‘I will not be eating, as I have business to attend to immediately.’

*Business.* Probably Voldemort. ‘What hurt you last time, sir?’ she asked curiously. He scowled as he slipped the last button into place, and she thought at first that he would not reply, but then he said:

‘It was a skirmish on a moor. Kingsley was playing his role to the hilt. He cast a curse that hit me squarely, instead of grazing me as he intended. I should have died.’ He gave Hermione a piercing look that was more reminiscent of Dumbledore than her Potions Professor. ‘I am lucky that I did not.’

Without thinking, Hermione crossed the room and stood on tiptoe to plant a kiss on his cheek. As her lips touched the silk smooth, newly-shaven skin, desire seared through them so hot she was sure it would imprint him.

‘You are indeed. Be careful, Professor,’ she bade him as she picked up the tray and left, not waiting to register the shock in his usually icy eyes, or stop to think about her own embarrassment at so bold a maneuver.

*A child, a child, she's a child and a student, one of my students...But brilliant, and powerful, with a lust for learning- and beautiful, and her skill...And she too wants it... Yes, Severus, but she is an innocent. As she should remain.*

888

Minerva McGonagall looked up automatically as she stepped over the threshold of the Burrow. As usual, Hermione Granger was standing unobtrusively on the landing outside of her room. Since Snape's departure six days ago, whenever the front door opened, she stepped onto the landing, looking for one face amongst the many that flowed through the Burrow.

McGonagall sighed. *Bound. Merlin have mercy on them.* But today, the girl would get her wish.

Snape followed right behind her. His face lifted, almost instinctively, catching Hermione's eyes. They looked each other over for a moment, eyes taking an instant to drink one another in. Each contented that the other was well, they instantly returned to their tasks. She vanished back into her lab, and he went into the kitchen for the meeting. It was very discreet, McGonagall had to admit as she watched out of the corner of her eye. Anyone watching would assume that Hermione was curious to see the visitors, perhaps with the hopes of eavesdropping, and that Snape was examining his surroundings as was his habit.

*Albus should know,* McGonagall thought. She knew, of course, that Hermione had been

the one to nurse Snape back to health, but it seemed to have progressed their relationship, and by extension, the bond, in an undefined way, and her husband would want to know. If he didn't already.

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'Did you buy the ingredients I asked for?' Hermione asked Fred and George. They winked. Their industry allowed them access to many of the rarer items that Hermione needed to experiment with the potions

she was creating, and they had proved more than amenable, even refusing payment for their services.

‘Absolutely. A little of this, a little of that.’ They started handing her packages. They were never concerned with whether what they procured was illegal, if Hermione asked for it, that was good enough for them.

‘How’s the little bro doing, ‘Mione?’ George asked with a second wink. Hermione felt her heart seize a little, and her stomach performed its usual squirming antics at the thought of deception or betrayal. And the twins were so helpful- was it because they were so sure that she was going to marry into the family?

‘He’s fine,’ she replied in what she hoped was a bland voice. How bearable would the Burrow be to live in if she broke Ron’s heart? But one way or another, he would find out. She feared he already had. After she had helped Snape recover, he had avoided her more, and spent his time with Harry. *Poor Harry. He’s trying so hard to stay neutral in a fight that may or may not even be happening.*

‘It’s not going too well, is it?’ Fred was saying, a shrewd look suddenly covering his normally comical features.

‘To be honest, no,’ she admitted candidly. ‘But I still have to talk to him about it.’

‘Ron’s...an interesting case. *I* wouldn’t want to be married to him,’ George said. Fred shivered and made a gagging noise. But George’s face remained serious. ‘But he’s really into you, Hermione. Be fair with him.’

She nodded, feeling her stomach writhe even more under their pressure. How could she be fair with a boy she loved like a brother, but not like a boyfriend? For whom she felt no more than friendly affection? And *marry*? She hadn’t even thought of it- what were they expecting of her?

*And yet...why throw it away for a man-* she stopped herself. Somewhere lost in thought, she had excused herself to the twins and was now back in her lab. She could no longer deny that her attraction

went more than one way. She could still recall the way his eyes had looked that day he held her hand while eating, and the indefinable haze when he had fallen asleep next to her. It was more than just the gradual acceptance of a lab partner that he had acquired- there was something else hovering there, almost elusive, but not quite far enough beyond reach to be so. Especially since touching him increased her desire tenfold.

*No. It's not just me. But even so, what of it? Even that kiss on the cheek could have cost him his job. There is nothing else that we can do.* But keeping Ron as second choice was brutally unkind. Hermione shied away from the guilt she knew she would feel if she did not choose a time to speak to him.

It would have to be soon. That much resolved, she pulled her notes and several open books toward her. Hermione banished all thoughts of the opposite gender and began to carefully slice one of the roots Fred and George had brought her.

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Hermione had positioned herself by the door, and took cloaks as the witches and wizards of the Order entered for their monthly meeting. There were more than four dozen, but the kitchen at the Burrow seemed spacious as ever.

Ginny was silently serving tea, eavesdropping on snatches of conversation, and four sets of Extendable Ears were dangled over the landings. Neville had arrived not an hour before, and along with Harry, Ron and- quite unexpectedly- Lavender Brown, was listening to the muffled conversations of the members of the Order flowing through the entry way.

Snape was one of the last to enter. A long, brand-new and angry-red scratch ran from the corner of his left eye to his jaw. Almost instinctively, still covered by the shadows near the doorway, Hermione reached to touch it as she took his cloak. The air between her hand and his face grew warm, a fizzling glow ignited, and warm magic flowed straight from her fingertips into the wound, sealing it and making any scars vanish. Snape cocked an eyebrow, tilted his

head in thanks, and caught the hand as it lowered, squeezing it gently in his long fingers. It was a mistake.

Fire flashed through her so hot her breath vanished in a gasp, and she could not draw another. The lust the touch kindled in his eyes flared, scorching in its intensity...

Then he passed into the kitchen, releasing her hand to cast a hasty charm that altered his appearance- darkening his skin, bleaching his hair blond and changing black eyes to hazel, leaving her holding his cloak for a second too long. She hastily hung it. *I miss having him around to brew potions*, she excused herself. Somewhere within her, someone snorted. *You missed the flame. The desire. It was not his intellect but his touch you abhorred losing.* Since he had recovered, he had spent little time at the Burrow. And given what had just transpired, she understood why.

'What did you get?' Harry hissed at Ginny as those under-age reconvened upstairs in Hermione and Ginny's room.

'Lots of snippets, nothing specific- the number of Muggle murders is high, they're worried about Fudge telling the Muggle Minister of-whatever.'

'The Prime Minister,' Harry and Hermione chorused.

'Yeah, him. You-Know-Who has some new plan, very stealthy they say, Snape is trying to get details but he's gotten smarter this time, doesn't trust too many people- I dunno if that means Snape is out of the loop or what...that's pretty much all.'

'We pretty much got small talk: "Everything quiet at Hogwarts these days, Minerva?" "Are we expecting Albus?" "How're your daughters, Doris?" Some secret society trying to save the world we got,' Ron snorted.

'They do dangerous things all day long. Sometimes its nice to relax,' Hermione said quietly.

'Did you talk to Snape when he first came in?' Harry asked her. 'I thought you might have.' Since nursing him, they had assumed that

she was no longer frightened of him and that she could do all the necessary detective work that required his personal responses.

‘No,’ she admitted, glad that she did not easily blush. They had not exchanged so much as a verbal greeting. ‘I just took his cloak and hung it up.’

‘Fred and George won’t say anything?’ Lavender asked with a frown.

‘No,’ Ron confirmed with a grimace. ‘Which makes them almost as high as Percy on the prat list. They could tell their own brother.’

‘Except that you can’t keep a secret to save your life,’ Ginny replied tartly.

‘What are you doing here, Lavender?’ Hermione asked before a row could break out.

‘My mum and dad are joining the Order,’ Lavender said softly. ‘They decided it was time to actively take part. My sister lives on her own and works for Gringotts. Since Hogwarts is the safest place now and I’m there, they figured they weren’t responsible for us, and could afford the risk.’

‘That’s...amazing,’ Harry said sincerely. ‘Welcome to the ‘Left Out’ club.’

Lavender cracked a small smile, but it was reserved. This was a very different girl than the giggling creature that had for so long inhabited Hermione’s dormitory. She was... more graceful. Dressed in very simple robes the color of her name, with no make-up and no simpering smile, she was very composed, and seemed almost ladylike.

‘It’s all right. Really,’ Hermione tried to reassure her. Lavender shrugged.

‘People die all the time. Susan Bones’ aunt, Amelia Bones, was killed last week. What’s to keep my parents from going the same way?’

‘Dumbledore is trying to stop him. The Order won last time. They’ll win again,’

Ginny’s voice had an enthusiasm and a confidence that none of them felt. But both Neville and Lavender were new to the high-stress, constant-tension atmosphere born of the Order’s existence at the edge of life.

‘My Great-Uncle Algie is joining again too,’ Neville announced proudly. ‘Are you staying the rest of the summer too, Lavender?’

She shook her head. ‘No. My parents do not want me at Headquarters. I will probably join Parvati in France. It is far less dangerous there.’

An awkward silence descended on the group. Hermione cleared her throat and rose. ‘I’m going to continue working, if anyone needs me I’ll be right in there.’

‘What’s she working on?’ Hermione heard Lavender ask as she hurried away.

‘Potions,’ Ron’s voice held all the disgust she never wanted to hear. ‘I swear- it’s her

new mania. First house-elves, now potions. What next?’

‘We need the potions she brews,’ Ginny said simply. ‘You wouldn’t want to be without bone knitting solutions if you arrived with six broken ribs and a punctured lung.’

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‘I have a new recipe for you,’ Snape dropped a piece of parchment on her table after the meeting broke up downstairs, his disturbing disguise still in place. Hermione snatched it, focusing on it to keep herself from dwelling on him. She felt as if he were standing far too close to her, while all at once not close enough, so she moved discreetly back to her cauldron. He did not follow her.



'If you wish to try it, that is.' As always, there was challenge laced with disdain in his voice. He was pushing her- but it also allowed him to vent his ire. He had found his mind straying at the most dangerous times to this little lab and how much he missed being in there, with someone. With Hermione. With the thrill that brushing against her brought him. An adult life starved for friendly human contact suddenly had a desire to binge. An indulgence he could not afford.

'I do. Where will you be, sir?' she asked.

'Away. You are more than competent to do it yourself, Miss Granger,' he said coolly. His tone was cold, the words warm. But Hermione lifted her head as she finished scanning the parchment and looked him squarely in the eye. She had nothing to hide, and nothing to hide behind. He knew the delicacy of their situation, and she knew he knew.

'Always the bold Gryffindor.' He smirked enigmatically and strode out the door. 'If you have any questions- write them.'

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The next day, he was back for two hours, and they worked in silence. But what had once

been a deadly combination, then a cool sharing of space had turned into an easy companionship. She did not speak because she felt no need to- touch was enough, and often too much, indicating needs and directing one another with their hands alone, trying to allow their fingers both to linger and not remain so long as to permit their emotions to become concrete.

Hermione felt the thrill of skating a razor-thin line. It could not become more defined than it was now, lest he place himself in danger- both with the Headmaster and the Dark Lord. But it was understood- if unacknowledged, and she liked it that way. She liked the way his smooth fingers occasionally lingered on the back of her hand when directing her, the gentle pressure on the small of her back to gain her attention.

When they finished the potion, he nodded to her and left without speaking, leaving her waiting for him to come again.

888

By the beginning of August, they had cautiously walked their double-edged sword for the past three weeks. Snape hadn't been to their private lab in nearly a week, and Hermione was worried, and eager to see him. She would, however, never have admitted to the latter. She did not need to. He would "hear" it the next time she touched him.

'Miss Granger.' His voice came from behind her as she stirred the potion clockwise.

'Professor.' Her relief did not color her tone as she continued stirring, but nothing could keep it out of her eyes when she finally turned to look at him. They flickered over his face, checking, as always, for injury.

'Your ministrations are hardly so tender that I come running back for more,' he told her dryly.

'If you weren't constantly in pain, I wouldn't constantly look,' she replied pertly, and added her shrivelfig to the solution.

He shrugged off his over-cloak and started to check cauldrons, prodding each substance as was his ritual. It was like he was becoming re-acquainted with them each time he stepped into the room.

As he neared her, she reached out to touch his arm, and then pointed at the doxy eggs sitting in water to keep them moist.

'How many?'

'Four.'

He carefully gathered them and transferred them to the potion. But he stood to her left and slightly behind her after dumping them in, and this time, his hand settled at the base

of her spine and remained there.

A need for human touch, the understanding that he was important- no, *valued*- welled

deep within Hermione, and a loneliness so strong it robbed her of her breath. But they were...strange. Real, but disconnected, not her own. Blinking, she glanced at him, and saw his eyes closed, face remote-lonely.

She was reading his emotions through the hand on her back.

'Professor?' she whispered.

'I'm fine. Let's see,' his eyes snapped open and he bent to peer over the notes still on the table, burying himself in academia, cursing himself for his weakness in her presence.

'Are you sure that another ounce of cognac wouldn't make the solution more potent?'

'In which way are you referring to, professor?' she teased, struggling to dispel the senses that had flooded her.

'In the only way that matters in potions, Miss Granger.'

'We can try it,' she agreed. He Summoned it, and she poured it in. Instantly, the draught turned a deep gold.

'Beautiful color,' she remarked.

'Hmmm.'

He leaned down to stir it once each way. Their faces were very close, almost touching. His fine black hairs falling forward caught on her neck, tickling her lightly. She could feel the warmth of his breath leaving his mouth.

She hesitated, as did he, savoring the feel of her under his hands. Even on her lower back, he could feel the fluttering of her heart, and

she could feel not only the physical touch of his hand but also the surging, mingled desire, guilt and fear running through him.

For the first time, the potion was completely forgotten, and they simply stood, content to breathe, his lips nearly brushing her cheek, willing the moment to drag- not to have to think and assess, not to be student and teacher, for when it broke, all of the reality would bring itself to bear with a vengeance that would shatter this fragile instant.

‘Severus? Miss Granger?’

## Fighting Temptation

‘Miss Granger.’ The cold voice washed over her. Hermione lifted her head from her book, marveling that the voice that had once clenched her stomach with unpleasant anticipation now sent shivers of frustrated longing rippling down her spine.

But she was in the library, and so carefully schooled her expression, tuning it to dread and fear instead of her internal delight. She was in a public place- and as long as a third pair of eyes could be watching, she could only loath him, never crossing that line, none of her emotions belied by her face or her voice.

‘What are you doing?’

‘Reading. Hardly a crime, professor.’

‘None of your cheek. *What* are you reading?’

She flipped the cover over. It was a very old, little-used text. ‘A theory book,’ she replied, hoping to throw him off.

Snape did not withdraw. He peered at the cover. ‘*Theories of the Magic Created by the Order of the Ang’guin Weyr.*’ He did not bother to ask her why. Dumbledore had said that Harry Potter was protected by the Elemental Wards developed by the ancient order. Doubtless, Hermione was using her love of research once again to help the brat. She intended to go. She wanted to rescue him.

He shook his head, looked at her appraisingly and said: ‘Ten points from Gryffindor for such an utter waste of time.’ Hermione met his glare for an instant. The points were because he didn’t want her to go, she could feel it from him, even as he stood across the table from her. But Ron would, and she could not let him walk into the Riddle House alone and unprepared.

He could hear her determination, a solid, immovable block of thrumming confidence in his mind, and cursed her silently. When would she understand the risks and stop foolishly-

‘Never, Professor Snape,’ she whispered aloud. He startled, and narrowed his eyes at her further. With a flick of his robe, he turned and walked out.

As the dear shape that exasperated her so grew dim in the gradually-darkening library, Hermione flipped the book back open to her place.

It was true, she had started reading the book looking for the theory behind the Elemental Wards- this book told neither how to cast nor how to evade the wards, it was strictly theory- but after she had read every section about them she had found in the index a different set of enchantments that caught her eye.

*Bindings.* It further branched into *Conscious* and *Unconscious*. She had hesitated, but her bond with Snape, straining the air between them and growing worse every day was not one of their deliberate making. She had flipped to ‘Unconscious’, page five-hundred-thirty-seven and begun to read.

*“Far more rare than its controlled counterpart, the Conscious Binding, is the phenomena of the Unconscious Binding. This uncommon union is the fusion of the whole of two souls, not just the part of the soul and lacking the specifications afforded to those who bind consciously.*

*“Discovered in days pre-dating any historical records kept in Muggle Britain, the*

*Unconscious Bind was the reaction of the raw magical power of a witch or wizard to an equal amount of power in another. It brought together the greatest power and talent, the offspring of which eventually fashioned the wizarding elite that formed the Wizengamot and the Wizard Lords of Britain.*

*“Potent beyond measure, the bound pair suffers one another’s physical pains, has enormous power and latent knowledge when healing the other, reads one another’s emotions and, if developed properly, can communicate telepathically.”*

Hermione finished the passage and flipped the book closed. There was more to read later, but she feared what she would find. *The*

*fusion of two souls.* That certainly seemed to explain the unusual aspects of their non-relationship...

Shivering slightly, she turned back to the Elemental Wards section. These she could use to help someone instead of dwelling within.

She dreaded telling Snape, or him finding out for himself. They had determined that afternoon in the Burrow two months ago that they could not continue as they had been, that their interactions offered nothing but emotions they could neither tame nor fulfill. He would surely take a dim view of having a soul magically fused to hers.

888

*Two Months Prior...*

They jumped apart as if scalded. Hermione's last strong impression from him was shock and an over-powering sense of self-disgust as Snape instantly crossed to one of his own potions, book in hand, and Hermione stirred her cauldron three times counter-clockwise, struggling to control the rise of her breathing and the mad beating of her heart.

By the time Professor McGonagall poked her head in the door, all looked as it should. Even the flush that highlighted both faces could be attributed to the steam and the heat- nothing more.

'Am I interrupting anything?' Somehow, the question sounded loaded to Hermione's ears, and she could feel them burning. And then she recalled healing Snape in her office. The same thought struck her once again. *She knows.* She was shocked at the steadiness of Snape's voice as he replied:

'Aren't you always? I'm working.' Hermione nearly laughed at how completely like

him that was- the "I". It was never "we." *And probably never will be,* she thought. But a balloon welled within her in spite of her fears and nervousness, hope bubbling in her throat.

‘Severus- for how much longer? You know the Headmaster wanted us to meet with him as soon as he finishes with Kingsley and the Aurors.’

‘I will come as soon as I add the final ingredient to the Skele-gro,’ he told her calmly. ‘The Headmaster will not be ready for a few more minutes.’

McGonagall crossed the room to lay her hand on Hermione’s shoulder. ‘How are you, Miss Granger?’ she asked.

Hermione wondered what McGonagall expected her to say. But she just smiled at her favorite professor. To say that McGonagall was like a second mother was not honest to either the professor or her mother. A mentor, an encourager- her silent help and approval the precise opposite of her counter-part’s constant sneering and hostility. *Good cop, bad cop*, Hermione thought whimsically as she glanced sideways at Snape, fully concentrated on his potion. She mentally cursed McGonagall’s timing, even as she realized it was probably all that had saved both of them from a compromising situation.

*We’re already in a compromising situation. McGonagall just ensured our safety. For now.* She glanced at her professor’s sharp expression. *And, Hermione admitted bleakly to herself, she knows. She knew before we did.*

‘I’m fine, professor,’ Hermione said brightly. ‘This work is fascinating...I get to experiment a bit too.’ A thought suddenly struck her, carrying all her fears and worries to the back of her mind in the interest of a new twist of thought. ‘Can Transfiguration be a useful component of potion brewing?’

Snape snorted from his corner. As one, both women glowered at his back as he continued to work, utterly oblivious to their frowns. But as he added the ingredients, his mind replayed the sound of her voice- eager, excited, genuinely interested- as though the thought had just occurred to her. Which it probably had. *I love the way her voice sounds when she is engaged in something. There is something so...strong and alive and untainted and genuine about it.*

‘Well, you know Charms are,’ McGonagall started slowly.



‘Yes. But surely there are some powerful combinations of Potions and Transfigurations.’

‘Yes. *Moste Potente Potions* has some detailed descriptions of it- I believe you are familiar with the text?’ Professor McGonagall looked at her sternly over the rims of her glasses. Hermione blushed a deeper red than before. Did every teacher know about that Polyjuice Potion? She had thought they were so careful...but on mature reflection, it seemed more and more that they had simply been allowed to get away with it, as opposed to actually having fooled anyone. It was somewhat disheartening.

‘Ah, I thought I would find you here,’ Dumbledore was at the threshold, sherbert lemon in his teeth. He held out the bag. Tradition dictated that they decline, which all three did dutifully. ‘I believe we have some other, pressing business.’ He invited the professors out with a wave of his hand, eyes twinkling at Hermione. ‘We should allow Miss Granger to use her lab without interruption.’ Neither professor argued and allowed Dumbledore to precede them out.

Hermione glowered after them. *He needs you.* Dumbledore knew as well, and once again, he had deliberately ruined any chance that she had to speak with him privately, or even ask to. Dumbledore and McGonagall both knew, but she feared she would never get the chance to question either about Binding Spells. Somehow, they both seemed aware that she wanted to talk to them, and both appeared equally determined never to be in a situation where she could ask.

Snape exited last, and he turned, as he closed the door behind him, to look at her. She gazed at him steadily, her hands automatically dicing the roots, knowledge and practice making her fingers deft, a complicated dance in miniature. She met his black eyes boldly, refusing to show any fear in her face. His eyes sparked with amusement, admiration and a touch of something like fear before he closed the door.

888

*It's like having an addiction,* Snape thought bitterly, pacing by the fire in Snape Manor. He was famous amongst the Death Eaters for never indulging a sensual desire. Lucius Malfoy had his mistresses,

MacNair had his drink, Avery his narcotics. Snape used none of these distractions. The Dark Lord, his equal in abstinence, approved, and encouraged him.

But this was different all together. What he had identified as a blend of attraction and caring fostered by their proximity and the astounding intelligence he had suddenly discovered was becoming a raging fever that he feared was spinning out of his control. He had hoped that by admitting it to himself would allow him to keep it at bay. She was a student. Off-Limits.

Instead, it had fired his heat. Not only did he feel so, he could tell that she did. His hand on her back had opened her to him in a way almost revelatory- teeming confusion, love of knowledge, fear, anticipation and enjoyment had flickered through his hand, pulsing almost like the beat of her heart. And it happened every time. He could not touch her without feeling the scathing flame of her attraction, and without transmitting his own.

*I can't. If Lucius Malfoy were to discover it...if the Dark Lord were to discover it.* The pain Hermione would endure would be beyond imagining. And the Order would be at risk. And, most important of all, there was her innocence to consider.

*But she likes it.* This beyond all else puzzled him. Hermione was hardly knock-out gorgeous. And only when she tried did she turn heads. But she could do it- and when she stood over a cauldron with the light of the love of knowledge in her eyes, she was beautiful to behold. And there were certainly boys enough who whispered about her, though few had the guts to approach and admittedly, most of them were Ravenclaws. And she, for whatever reason, was drawn to him.

*And I am no prize,* he had to admit freely. He was not a practitioner of the art of self-deception and he knew his own appearance, knew it was hardly the kind to attract the beautiful and the young. He had done his best to keep it that way. Other human beings complicated life in the most absurd ways. His demeanor added another layer, his naturally dour disposition sharpened into a weapon that he wielded with skill born of the years of experience. But in spite of all of it...

*She likes it. She wants it. She enjoys the racing of her heart when I stand next to her,*

*touch her, breathe on the back of her neck. She even likes my sarcasm, our push-pull. She wants it,* his mind kept whispering.

'Enough,' he told himself aloud. But instead of the stern discipline he'd hoped his tone would have, it sounded anguished and desperate even to his ears. But he could not. He had lived with own self-loathing long enough to understand that he would never wish it upon anyone else. No matter what fantasy the girl had constructed about him in her head, working in a lab, she could never deal with the real thing. Potions Master and Potions Professor were only two of his personas- and the nicest two at that. If she ever saw the others...

*Even if she thinks she wants it, whatever she feels would never survive that encounter. But it's so...I cannot believe she doesn't, see neither pity nor revulsion nor hatred in someone's eyes when they look at me...*

*I crave her company. Merlin help me, I want to be around her. I more than want it. And there is the matter of her healing, her abilities...that is magic, not normal...perhaps this obsession is induced?* But even if it were, he didn't want to lose it, to change it...he groaned aloud and slammed his fist into the mantle.

The master of self-discipline was beginning to break.

888

Hermione stirred restlessly, staring at the ceiling. But it was no good. She couldn't stay in bed for the rest of her life, she had to get up and do it sometime- and it was far better done now than waiting to be back at Hogwarts.

Slowly sitting up and slinging her legs off the bed, Hermione steadied herself before choosing her clothes and rising to seek out Ron.

He was hardly difficult to find. He was in the kitchen alone, unusually subdued as he slurped out of a cup of coffee and read the *Daily*

*Prophet.* Hermione greeted him, trying for a light voice but she could hear the unnatural straining in her own ears and winced.

‘Why don’t we just get it over with?’ Ron said bluntly as she seated herself next to him.

This was not the tack she had been expecting, and the entirety of her planned speech flew out of her head. ‘What?’ she said reflexively.

‘Look- I know you don’t like the relationship anymore, so let’s drop it.’ Ron was clearly making an attempt to head her off.

Hermione simply sighed, barely remembering not to shrug and further hurt him. A ghost of a feeling was all she had, the hint of attraction remaining at the beginning of their relationship now gone, iced over and preserved- a memory, but not a reality.

‘I- you’re right. I guess I’m just not ready, Ron.’ Her insides squirmed a little at her lies, but she reasoned they were for a good cause. *‘I’m sorry Ron, but I’m falling for Professor Snape,’* probably would not go over well. The Burrow might not survive the explosion.

‘Yeah,’ he swirled his coffee moodily, and then gave her a hopeful look. ‘Is it because of the war? ‘Cause I can wait until afterwards. I can wait until you’re ready, until you’re safe.’

Hermione flinched at the thought. ‘No, I...’ she floundered again. How could she say this? ‘I don’t want you to wait...it would be a waste of your time,’ she finally managed, studying her lap very hard to avoid seeing his eyes.

‘You’re just not interested.’ His voice, instead of filled with fury or frustration, was completely flat. Utterly toneless. Hermione had never heard such a terrifying sound. Her head snapped up, but his eyes were equally cold and stony.

‘Ron...’ she whispered, her throat closed in guilt and pain, ‘I’m so sorry...I thought-’

‘Clearly, you thought wrong. I guess we’ll leave it at that. I wouldn’t want to keep you from your precious potions- or their master,’ he

snarled, standing so abruptly that his coffee spilled, earning it a string of curses.

Hermione's blood froze, and she felt a thrill run from the base of her spine up to her neck. But there was no careful, clever look on his face. He did not look like someone who had made an accusation that they feared to be true, just a boy lashing out in hurt. Hermione relaxed a little. Professor Snape was the Potions Master, it was logical that he would help her, and that she would work with him. Ron was jealous and angry in general, not in specific.

'I am sorry,' she repeated, aware of how empty the words sounded.

'Whatever.' The door closed with a snap as he left, and Hermione rested her forehead on the table. She had broken up with Ron while being in his house because she was gradually sliding down a slope neither she nor Snape could afford to take a single farther step on.

*I must be going mad.*

So she returned to her customary place in times of confusion. The potions lab.

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Harry rapped on the door.

'Come in,' Hermione called.

Harry entered the small laboratory and sat down on one of the tables, legs swinging randomly as he watched his best friend of five years slice, stew and pour into two different cauldrons.

'Yes, Harry?' her voice was chillier than usual. Harry knew she assumed he had come to rebuke her.

'How're you holding up?' he asked instead.

Hermione kept dicing, but answered quietly. 'The worst thing, Harry, is that I really can't feel any regret. I was trying to be honest, and I definitely fancied him once. I guess... we just waited too long, you

know? And I lost my attraction. I feel awful- for him. I don't really feel much of anything for myself.'

*Except relief.* But McGonagall would award points for breaking rules before Hermione would admit that to Harry.

'Well- he's taking it badly. And Mrs. Weasley...' Harry trailed off, and Hermione felt tears pushing at her lower lids. Mrs. Weasley had always done so much for them, for her...

'Does she think I'm the Wicked Witch of the West?' Hermione tried to joke, but her voice cracked slightly in the middle, and Harry hugged her, one arm tightly around her waist.

'She'll get over it. I think she really did count you as one of the family- practically married to Ron already.'

'Well, no one consulted me about that,' Hermione muttered bitterly.

'I know. But Hermione...he's my best mate, and he's taking this hard.'

'Surprise, surprise,' she replied sarcastically, deliberately moving away from him.

'No- Hermione, don't act childish,' Harry said, tone sharpening. 'I'm not taking sides- I'm just letting you know what's going on, since you've locked yourself in here.'

'Thanks,' she said. 'For not taking sides. I mean it. That's nice- since you so often take his.'

'Well...this isn't really something that I have a strong opinion about. It just didn't work, for whatever reason, and I'm sorry for Ron- but I have to respect that you know what you're doing. You're one of the smartest people I know. I just wish you hadn't- well- I guess the whole situation is not what one would call ideal. I'm sorry too, Hermione.'

'That's possibly the most sensitive thing you've ever said,' Hermione said thoughtfully,

tipping chopped bowtruckle livers into one solution.

‘Anytime.’ Harry grinned at her boyishly, watched her for a few more moments in comfortable silence, and left.

Hermione continued cutting and adding slowly, not wanting to face Mrs. Weasley, or Ginny, or anyone else. Fred and George rose to her mind and she wiped away the water flowing from her eyes with the back of her hand.

She was so lost in thought that she didn’t notice he was there until a question pulsed at the back of her head and a quiet voice said:

‘Such inattention can get you killed, Miss Granger.’

She nearly dropped the knife. As it was, she caught it clumsily and sliced open her hand.

Snape covered her stinging palm with his larger ones before she could reach for her wand. Light glowed over their joined hands, stopping the blood and warmth trickled into her fingers, healing the accidental wound. She vividly recalled lying, her head in his lap, as he healed her for the first time.

Perhaps that was when this strange bond had begun to grow? Dumbledore’s elusiveness frustrated her, and McGonagall was, if anything, equally as bad since the day she had disturbed them.

She lifted her face to ask Snape- and instantly realized it was a mistake. Passion flowed between them, uninterrupted and uninhibited. Hermione’s breath caught in her chest, and she could feel the hitch in his throat. Snape gazed at the tear tracks that still streaked her face and one hand lifted to wipe them away, thumb pressing her cheeks to erase the results of her morning’s disaster.

She stared at him in earnest, tears forgotten in favor of the hand caressing her, brown

irises and black searching one another for unneeded confirmation.

‘Isn’t it time,’ her voice echoed dry, ironic and amused between them, infinitely older than her sixteen years, ‘that we stopped playing this game, Professor?’

Snape quirked an eyebrow, silent. But the desire and sheer weight of wanting seething from one hand to the next propelled them, and Hermione stood on tiptoe, face tilted upwards as Snape leaned down, his free hand grasping the back of her neck, bringing her mouth to meet his-

-and stopped. His mouth hovered so close his breath whispered across her lips. Snape closed his eyes, limbs trembling with the effort of denying himself. Sensing the enormity of the battle going on in the man before her, Hermione forced herself to remain still, lips still eagerly seeking his, struggling with her own need.

Snape thrust her from him, wrenching himself away so forcefully he spun into a cauldron. He seized the iron, ignoring the heat, steadying his feet, reining his desire.

His black hair swirled forward to cover his face, hiding him physically from her, for all the good it did. Hermione had stumbled back a few steps as he pushed her, and now leaned half-bent over her work table, mindless of the sharp corner digging into her hip as she tried to balance both her own emotions and the raging flood cascading from Snape.

As his breathing evened, Snape straightened, winced, healed the blisters puffing on his hands from the hot metal and slowly turned around.

Looking at her brought all his carefully channeled ardor howling through his blood again, and he could see in her widening eyes that she felt it- of course she did. He could feel her too, a sense of overwhelming want- and fear.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered.

'Don't be. I'm not,' she replied fiercely. He could hardly believe the complete honesty of her reply.

'You aren't?'



‘Never, Professor.’ Long silence stretched between them, and even with the strength of their link to one another, Hermione wondered if she’d bared too much of herself with her admission.

‘I think you’re right,’ he finally managed. ‘It is time to stop playing this game.’

Hermione could hear the vaguely forming thoughts, and knew she wasn’t going to like what he was going to say, but she asked anyway. ‘What do you mean?’

He finally stood up fully, shaking his body as if throwing off chains. ‘You can manage in here without me. I will tell the Headmaster that I no longer feel that it is...necessary... for me to be here to ensure the Burrow’s safety, and that I will continue my brewing at Hogwarts.’

As he spoke, Hermione tapped into the reserve of inner, ruthless strength he was using to contain his emotions and borrowed it, using the discipline it gave her to tame her own feelings, dampening the pressure that seemed so ready to explode.

‘Yes, Professor,’ came her quiet reply. He started for the door and she made a movement, swiftly checked as he glanced over his shoulder at her, a rueful smile curving the thin edges of his mouth.

‘No, Miss Granger,’ he replied, to her body and her question, and she was surprised to feel his battle of self-control resume. ‘Not even once. If I touch you at all-’

‘You’re afraid you won’t be able to stop,’ she finished.

‘Yes,’ he whispered. She let him get to the door this time before asking her last, burning question that had plagued her since she had rolled across the dungeon floor in his arms months ago.

‘What is happening to us?’

Snape shook his head. ‘I don’t know. I daresay the Headmaster might, but I cannot think of how to approach him with the question.’

‘And you will not come back?’

'I dare not, Miss Granger. You are my student. Remember that.'

## A Renewed Proposal

Hermione lingered in the classroom as the rest of her class bolted, keeping her eyes on her desk to ignore the simmering emotions bubbling within her. She was debating the merits of speaking when she heard him murmur her name, not without effort.

‘Miss Granger-?’ The lilt ended unfinished, as if there were more he wished to say and could not voice.

‘Professor-’ she hesitated, swallowing the emotions that surged unbidden in her throat, strangling her speech. Her face, breasts and abdomen flushed with heat and she gripped the desk to keep herself from either throwing herself at him or sprinting from the room.

‘I would remind you that I feel all that you do. Please hurry,’ he ground out. He had purposefully stayed at his desk, resolutely refusing to approach her even as she knew he had to fight with himself to do so. The searing shield of their unexpressed desire seemed to crackle between them, so strongly Hermione could not focus. The mantra that she had taken up all too often of late resounded in her head. *This is driving me mad.*

‘What do you have to say?’ His voice had sharpened, and she knew that he was hearing some of what was in her mind.

‘I know what’s happening,’ she managed to blurt.

‘Do you?’ he asked, trepidation in both tone and mind. She frowned, feeling the shadow of a secret where their minds merged. But now was not the time to press for it.

‘Yes. I found it...I found it in the book I was reading yesterday.’ She finally lifted her head, though she gazed slightly past his shoulder. The last time their eyes had met- though accidentally- it had unleashed a passion so violently powerful Snape had instantly turned and all but run rather than endure it.

‘Well? You can hardly expect me to guess-’ he halted as their scene in the library replayed at her bidding in his mind. That book. He *should* have known.

She drew a ragged breath. Why did it take no time alone in a room with this man to set her heartbeat on hummingbird speed? Her body thrummed with exhaustion as if she had just run a marathon, and retained the spurting adrenaline of a sky diver before his first jump. If one could grow weary with one's nerves constantly jangling, Hermione was tired- tired of her heart in her throat, of her stomach roiling in her abdomen, tired of the emotional overflow of the man in front of her, the occasional stray words or sentences that drifted through her mind, the dreams she knew they shared.

Living on the cusp of madness and sanity was gradually taking its toll on the young Gryffindor, and she could not stop until she had found a way to control it.

'We are bonded.'

'Well done, Miss Granger. I would have thought you'd spot that ages ago.'

'Unconsciously bonded,' she snapped in reply, anger meeting her lust and dampening it. The two emotions helped keep the nervousness out of her voice when she continued: 'Our souls are fused.'

'Indeed.' The shock of surprise she had expected did not come, not from his unshifting features and not from their link. Fury flooded her, aching need shoved aside for the first time in ages. *You knew?*

He took a step back, the rage in her mental "voice" unexpected. 'I was told not to tell you.'

'Why?' she blazed. She made for him, and stopped after three strides, knees buckling, anger evaporating in the stifling heat of her craving, worsening as she drew closer.

'Get out,' he ordered softly. She could feel him crumbling in front of her, the sheer effort of reining the tension so palpable a wall formed between them.

Turning, she seized her books and fled the room.

In the hallway, her heartbeat and breathing again under her control, she reflected grimly she might have to go to Dumbledore. Much as she abhorred the idea of telling anyone, most of all Snape's employer, it grew worse with every passing Defense class, each meal they sat through in the Great Hall. She was already resigned to keeping her head and her hand down, lest some display give her away. Her dread of the class far outweighed the faint apprehension Potions had caused her, though for completely different reasons.

Her steps had started towards the stone gargoyle when she halted. '*I was told not to tell you.*' Her brown eyes narrowed once again. Told not to tell her. Who had told him, if not the Headmaster?

Squaring her shoulders and gritting her teeth, she resolved to return to the library and read more. If he thought she should not know, then she would not seek his help. There had to be a cure to her growing sense of insanity that she could find.

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*Two Months Prior...*

'We need to tell them, Albus,' Minerva said softly, snapping closed the book she had

been poring over.

Dumbledore stretched, sighing. One of the few evenings that they could both spend in the cottage together, and she had to discuss Hogwarts-slash-Order business. But she was right. He did not understand his own reluctance to face this particular issue. Perhaps because it was not so cut-and-dry as the battle against Voldemort. Severus Snape and Hermione Granger were people he admired, a son he'd never had and a favored, fostered grand-daughter.

But that did not change their binding, or alter their situation, or the fact that the wizarding world would take a dim view of their consummation of such a relationship, bind or no. His last walk into the lab, the air had seethed with the tension between them, so strong, so nearly tangible, that he was shocked that no one else seemed to notice. His wife had had to remind him gently that no one living was

so attuned to human interaction, especially between two people he knew so well.

‘Tell them what, Minerva?’ he asked, rising to pace, brandy in hand.

‘The truth. Miss Granger is already hunting for answers, we have both been avoiding her for that very reason. As for Severus...well, he has a great deal more material at his fingertips than she does, even if he has significantly less time, and he may be casting shrewd guesses. We do not want them to figure it out in their own and then discover that we could have told them- Severus will explode.’

‘Minerva, we both know we can’t just approach them...they are struggling against the tide, against their emotions,’ Dumbledore idly combed his beard in frustration. ‘If we tell them we know, and what it is, it is like to condoning it- and I can’t...but I also cannot deny them. An Unconscious Bond born of the Magic of Ang’guin Weyr is not lightly nor easily formed. It goes outside of convention and law, even those in place for the safety of the wizarding world.’

‘They will be discreet. I daresay they will hardly do more than acknowledge it before she graduates and there is no one to care what they do.’

Dumbledore shook his head. ‘No, Minerva...there will always be those who care. Have you forgotten the role he plays, or that she is a Muggle-born? Do you have any conception of what Voldemort will do to her, and to him, if he suspects their involvement?’

‘You said you expect Harry will slay the Dark Lord before he graduates,’ Minerva countered swiftly.

‘The Dark Lord, yes, but all the Death Eaters? Never. And when Severus not only

betrays their master but takes a Muggle-born to wife... Their relationship will always be fraught with dangers. I am loathe to see them enter that lifestyle...constantly hiding, always struggling...’

‘But Albus,’ Minerva said slowly, ‘Raw Magic cannot be circumvented. It’s already done, more permanent than any marriage vow. “Until

death do they part...”- except that the wizards of old speculated that the bond extended after death. They will do it on their own and you know that, my love. The only difference is whether they have help and guidance or not.’

‘And how can we deny them that?’ Dumbledore whispered, staring into the flames. ‘How can I help them in something not only morally questionable but life-threatening to either or both?’

‘You are a general,’ Minerva murmured, rising to stand next to him at the fireplace, fingertips pressed against his arm. ‘You do what must be done. This cannot be halted- we can only help direct it now.’

‘And Hermione knows I know,’ Dumbledore told her. ‘I as good as told her.’ He smiled at his wife ruefully. ‘It is one of the reasons I have been assiduously avoiding her.’

‘I, too. I think she figured it out when I fetched her to heal him.’

Dumbledore shook his head. ‘The ramifications of this secret- if broken- are staggering. I think it’s best that we pretend you don’t know- and that you simply acted on my obscure orders when you went to her to heal him.’

‘Will anyone believe that?’ Minerva asked softly. ‘Will Severus believe that?’

‘I do not want you to suffer from the rebounding implications if someone finds out. I am thought omnipotent within Hogwarts- it is easily believable that I gave you orders that you did not understand, and that you obeyed them because you trust me.’

‘Merlin knows *that’s* in keeping with reality,’ she admitted. He chuckled softly for a moment, but when she looked at him again his face was grave.

‘He will also keep the secret for you regardless- to Azkaban if he must. He thinks very highly of you, Minerva.’

‘Hmmm. Sometimes. When I’m not interfering with his precious Slytherins.’

Dumbledore wasn't listening. 'I will tell him tomorrow. I will also tell him not to tell her.'

'Why?'

'Because I cannot condone it. He will find a way to suppress it at least until...until wizarding law and propriety permits them to do what they wish. But Hermione should remain unburdened.'

'You will tell him about all of it, though? And when the time is right she too will know?'

'Do not worry about that. When the time is right, she too will know. And yes- he will know all that I can tell him about the bond. Only if he can guard against showing it to Voldemort can he survive.'

'Yes,' Minerva agreed softly.

*Survive for you to wish savagely that he had not.* Dumbledore gazed down at his wife, absorbed in the flames and thoughts of her young student, and the stab of pain that lanced through his ribs just under his heart stopped his breath in his throat. But he could not tell her. Not even her. She would fight against it to her death. It would compromise their chances to win the war. *Generals must even use themselves.*

*And what can they do? What can I tell Hermione- or Minerva- when the end of this year brings the apparent end of Severus Snape's allegiance to the Order and his all-but-open declaration of loyalty to the Dark Lord?*

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Dumbledore studied his young Potions master carefully as Snape entered his office. His hair was swung around his face to obscure more than usual, and he waved off the customary offer of tea with a careless hand, his face paler and his black eyes brighter than Dumbledore had seen him in some time.

'Sit, Severus,' he murmured gently.



'I prefer to stand,' the other man replied stiffly. 'I don't not wish to trespass heavily on your time this morning, Headmaster.'

*Wish it or no, you will be doing it,* Dumbledore thought, but did not insist. It had been fortunate that Snape had asked him for a meeting before Dumbledore himself had owled. He suspected that, unfortunately, the center topic was the same- even if Snape was going to come at it in a round-about manner. If the man wanted a chair, he could use the armchair Dumbledore had drawn up for him.

After clearing his throat and waiting for a moment, Dumbledore prompted his employee softly. 'Severus? You requested to speak with me?'

'Yes.' He started a little, his eyes once again focusing on the room. 'I apologize, Headmaster, my thoughts were- elsewhere.'

*The Burrow with that brilliant and all-too-untouchable student of yours,* Dumbledore thought grimly. *I have done them no favors in asking them to work together. In all likelihood, I have made it far worse.*

'This is a simple matter, but I thought it best to inform you,' Snape told him firmly, hands now clasped behind his back military fashion, 'that I will not be brewing in the Burrow any longer. Miss Granger is perfectly capable of doing the work on her own, and I see no reason not to continue my own experiments here and attending to other matters instead of baby-sitting children.'

Dumbledore nodded, his surprise a fleeting note in his blue eyes. It was kind of the man to give him so direct an opening. But that could not make it easier.

As the younger man inclined his head in respect and started for the door, Dumbledore whispered, his voice genuinely scratchy with sympathy, 'It won't work, my boy.'

Hand closed on the brass doorknob, Snape did not want to credit his ears with what they had just heard. He stiffened very slowly, and with the utmost care and civility, turned to ask in the most neutral voice he possessed, 'I beg your pardon?'

‘Running from it won’t solve the problem, Severus. Not even close.’

‘What problem?’ Snape’s mouth ran on autopilot while his brain frantically rooted through memories, searching for the moment that he had betrayed his feelings to the Headmaster.

‘Do not pretend with me, Severus. Just as you know the “mad, doddering, old man” is an act to keep the unwary exactly as they are, so I know your neutral, “I cannot possibly imagine what you’re talking about” face is nothing but protection.’ The older man leaned forward at his desk as Snape abruptly took a seat, his hands twisted together in his lap in an uncharacteristic display of vulnerability.

‘I know how you feel.’

‘How can you?’ The question was more of a challenge than Snape had intended, but he did not apologize, or even look at his employer.

‘How can I? Does it matter? You burn for her, day in, day out, every touch, every word, smile, glance is preserved in your mind, stamped indelibly on your soul, feeding and stoking the fire with a fuel that never runs dry. You can only be too close to her, but at the same time you can never get close enough. You share with her the strongest emotional connection of your lives, but it cannot be embodied in touch. She is both frustrating and fascinating, your high and low, as exotic as your exalted Holy Grail and as common and life-giving as the air you breath. You hold the power of her future in your pen, but her palms are wrapped around your heart-’

‘Stop. Please.’ Dumbledore stopped. It was the only time he had heard Snape plead. Truly, honestly- because he *needed* something-beg. He sat so still he might have been wax, perched on that chair, unmoving except for the quiet desperation of his voice.

After a moment, sure that he was all right, Dumbledore finished, ‘I am sorry. But as you can clearly hear, I know, Severus. You are bonded.’

‘Bonded.’ There was no surprise in the Potions master’s voice, but there was anger. ‘How was it formed? How do I break it?’

‘You don’t. It cannot be done, Severus, so I suggest you put that thought aside. Your soul is fused with hers.’

Now the head finally came up, and Snape was staring directly into the steady sky-colored eyes of his employer. ‘Fused?’ Dumbledore nodded the affirmative. ‘Then it can be sundered,’ Snape steeled himself to say.

‘Certainly,’ Dumbledore replied airily, and Snape knew what he was going to hear, ‘if one of you dies. And even that,’ his tone had switched to completely serious, ‘is not known. It is entirely possible that, literally, neither of you can survive without the other. Old records are very fuzzy on those particulars.’

Snape stared at him, and surged to his feet, pacing in the measured stride that meant he was frantically thinking. Dumbledore waited patiently, the sun rising to cast diamond-patterned rectangles from the east-facing windows on the fading foot-worn carpet. Finally, Snape spoke, voice snappish from sheer frustration.

‘What are we to do? Gods, Headmaster, I never...it is not intentional. There was no...attempt made, no ceremony, no...’ He closed his eyes, composed his thoughts. Never had a girl- or anything, for that matter, since he was a small child- so completely destroyed his ability to think. ‘You must believe that I would never, never, Headmaster, look at a student.’ The shiver of revulsion that traveled his frame was sincere. ‘This is unprecedented.’

‘I know, Severus. Listen to me,’ the older man urged. A flicker in Snape’s eyes indicated that he was paying close attention indeed. ‘The bond is Unconscious, not one formed by knowing intent of either of the parties it bonds. It is Raw Magic, partially leashed by the Order of Ang’guin Weyr, and pre-dating by centuries the widespread control of magic in Britain. I don’t think I need to remind you that this makes it not only ancient, but more powerful in it’s own right than nearly any magic now employed, and possesses its own laws that abrogate the ones wizards see fit to legislate now. This is, of course, a bit of a mystery and extremely enigmatic. It only happens to the very powerful when they meet someone of equal power, intelligence and

drive- and even then it is exceedingly rare. In researching it, I have found no evidence of its occurrence within the last thousand years.'

'Merlin's beard,' breathed the younger wizard.

'Indeed. The side effects, or symptoms, of the bond, are your increased healing abilities, which I believe you have both already experienced, the physical pain of the other person- which Miss Granger can likely tell you all about, and telepathic and empathic abilities with your partner.'

Snape's eyes widened as he glimpsed the web of actions and consequences rapidly spinning out before him. 'I battle all the time. I am tortured- thankfully not often, but when I am...' His face darkened. 'I have secrets- both of the Order and of the Dark Lord's. What if he touches her mind through mine? What if she finds out things that she cannot know? What if I am killed- by either side? Kingsley nearly killed me himself a month ago. Accidentally, yes, but that should not rebound on her...'

He brushed his hair back from his face, his unconscious signal of readying himself for action, and rounded on the Headmaster. 'How do I protect her?'

Dumbledore smiled sadly, blue eyes glittering. 'You don't. You cannot. And Severus, here's the rest of it.' Snape bit back the automatic desire to snap, *What, there's more?*, but refrained. Clearly, there was.

'The bond exists for one purpose, and one purpose only. It is a mating bond- to produce offspring combining your talents and intelligence.' The storm gathering on his Potions master's face threatened to flatten the Headmaster's desk, so Dumbledore hurriedly continued. 'Believe me, I am in no way advocating that you so much as touch her, Severus, and indeed, I must confess that I would likely have to fire you if I ever find out you have.' He sipped his tea. 'But this of course means that there are complications.'

*Chief amongst them that it would be my pleasure to touch the girl*, the thought flitted through his head chased by relentless self-disgust. Telepathic abilities...*How much worse will it be during term?* he wondered bleakly.

‘Severus, you are one of the most accomplished Occlumens alive. Use your talents.’ Dumbledore was leaning towards him again, his face exhausted with age and worry as he gave Snape his orders. ‘Protect her by locking away your mind.’

Snape nodded curtly. It was no easy task- guarding one’s mind against another’s entry took effort, it was not a skill one could make as easy and automatic as breathing, and to have to do it always, from the instant he woke to when he slept at school...all through every Order meeting with her just the staircase above them-

‘I will do what I must.’

‘And Severus,’ Dumbledore hesitated. The resentful check in his pupil’s strides told him that the younger man was desperate to get away and probably throw something, preferably through a window, but it was not fair to keep this from him. ‘It will continue getting worse. Even with your guards, I promise you, it will stretch the limits of your self control.’

‘Could we...’ Snape forced himself to make his next suggestion, ‘Could we send her out of the country? To another place?’

‘Physical removal will only partially solve the problem and only for a short while.’

‘How long?’ Snape pressed. ‘We only need until the end of her seventh year.’ *And then what? The lover of the spy? The wife? I barely know the girl.*

Dumbledore smiled sadly, his heart clenching in pain. But Severus did not yet know, he had not been told the solution to the problem of Draco Malfoy. No matter how long they waited, there would never be a good time. His words to Minerva doubled back in his head. *‘Their relationship will always be fraught with dangers. I am loathe to see them enter that lifestyle...constantly hiding, always struggling...’*

‘She must remain here. Harry needs her to defeat Tom, and so does the Order.’

‘Then I must control it,’ Snape snapped. And without waiting for dismissal, strode out the door.

The fluttering sorrow that stretched its cold wings over Dumbledore’s spirit lifted the corners of his mouth in a smile that touched the tears in his eyes. ‘You will try.’

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Hermione pulled a book from the shelf, flipping it open, her listless scroll of pages under her thumb belying her distraction. Since their encounter a week ago, Hermione had not seen her professor, but she had awakened the following morning to be distinctly aware of him. Not his thoughts or even his feelings, but just knowing that he existed, that he was there, entrenched in her mind- a part of her not her own, but not foreign either.

She retreated to that corner when faced with Ron’s flat gaze, Mrs. Weasley’s barely-concealed frown and Mr. Weasley’s look of confused grief. Hermione wanted to tell them it wasn’t her fault, that Ron’s chance had passed when neither of them was looking, that she wished she were in Grimmauld Place, her own house or even the Riddle House with Voldemort rather than endure their censure. But her head bowed, she did not shirk her chores, and Ginny, Harry and the twins spoke to her, prodded fun and joked with her, forcing her to ignore the gaping hole between her and the youngest Weasley son.

But it was this part of her brain that was oddly all the more her own for being shared in so novel a way. She could tell no one about Snape. Even if he weren’t a professor, given his past and his personality, who would understand? Intelligence was a cold comfort compared to passion, charm, love, compassion and warmth. From the flaring emotions of their interaction, Hermione knew he was not devoid of passion, but the other four...

*I would never have imagined myself attracted to someone like him.*

But she was, and the memory of their almost-kiss brought her left hand to her mouth, as if trapping memory to flesh.

‘Hermione?’

Embarrassed, Hermione spun, her book nearly falling. She managed to catch it just in time, slamming it against her knees to stop its fall- and then let it go to the floor.

It was Ron. He stood in the doorway, clearly ill at ease, but also clearly determined to say what he had to.

‘Ron,’ she smiled tentatively, which he returned nervously.

‘D’you want to go for a walk and talk a bit?’

Hermione blinked. In the past week, he had not spoken to her, and the silence between them when he thought Scabbers had been eaten by Crookshanks had been tropical by comparison. Why now?

‘Sure,’ she replied, off balance and uncertain. ‘Where?’

‘Just around the garden,’ he gestured. ‘We can’t go very far or else Mum’ll freak.’

‘Yeah.’ They walked down the stairs and out the back door together into the small garden plot. No longer overgrown and wild, much of the space belonged to growing vegetables that supplied their diet during the summer. But no number of carefully staked tomatoes and beans and Crookshanks’ hunting expeditions could diminish the gnomes that snuck into the yard and tunneled through it.

Hermione focused on a tomato beginning to grow tiny fruit. These cherry tomatoes were late-blooming, and would blossom and give fruit through September. The hard green bulge weighting the vine now was the size of a marble- and much easier to look at than Ron.

‘Hermione,’ he started, ‘I was thinking that maybe I pushed you too hard. I know that your first concern is school, and second is defeating You-Know-Who, and I didn’t want you to think...I love my mum, but I didn’t want you to think that I was asking you to marry me and have seven kids. I just wanted- I want- we’re really close, you and I, and we’ve been through a lot together...and I don’t want to- to fight, to grow away from you.’ He was stumbling a great deal, and Hermione smiled at his permanent awkwardness.

‘Oh, Ron, I don’t want to either,’ she sighed, and noticed how easy it would be to stop there- only for Snape’s features, never far from her mind, flash to the surface, and knew she had to say the rest of it. ‘But I can’t be anything other than your friend. I love you like a brother, Ron, but not...’

In spite of the drawn lines of his mouth and strained eyes, Ron’s voice was surprisingly gentle. ‘Not like that.’ He drew a deep breath. ‘I know.’

‘I meant it when I told you I was sorry,’ Hermione whispered. And she still meant it. How much easier would it be to dream of Ron all day long and feel his mind touching the back of hers, to sit at the table with him under the glowing eye of approval from everyone-

‘Ron! The Order meeting is starting, come inside!’ Mrs. Weasley’s voice pierced the gathering dark.

Locking eyes in shared amusement over Mrs. Weasley’s insistence that they all sit upstairs, and therefore plot ways to eavesdrop, Ron said, ‘Right.’

‘Well,’ Hermione started, feeling the awkwardness permeate her too.

‘It’s fine.’ He gave her his crooked half-smile. ‘Forget it.’

And she knew that would be all they ever said. The subject was as closed as if it had never happened at all. Harry needed them both, undivided and attentive, and Hermione knew that Ron knew it, as surely as she did. Voldemort came first. He would until he died.

Hermione was on the first stair just behind Ron when he entered. She could feel his mind solidify into her existence even as the *pop* that announced his arrival by Apparition reached her ears. Without thinking, knowing that she should not, she turned.

Even disguised, there was no mistaking him or the presence that had grown strong enough to hear his thoughts. He glanced at her and heat flushed her from head to toe. Ron might have been granted approval, but he could never have given her this raw feeling of power and want.



But even as she reached for the no-longer-so-fragile connection to the mind of the man in front of her, shutters closed, damping the fire, closing his mind. *Occlumency*, she realized. *He's using it to keep me out.*

*'I am your teacher. Remember that.'*

*Remember it*, she snorted to herself, tearing her head from him and following Ron up the stairs. *How could I ever forget?*

## The Bargain

‘Minerva.’

McGonagall stopped, turning to see her colleague tracking her down in one of the corridors. Her heart sank. The man was about to ask her to do the impossible...

‘I know that the Headmaster has forbidden you to join us on our raid of the Riddle House for Harry Potter,’ Snape said softly.

McGonagall frowned. This was not what she had expected. And that had been an argument held behind closed doors. Severus was nearly as bad as her husband for knowing what he should not.

‘What of it?’ she bit out.

‘No need to snap, Minerva.’

‘Pleased to meet you, Mr. Pot,’ she growled. He arched an eyebrow and allowed his mouth to twitch. Unbeknownst to most of his students- the notable exception being one Hermione Granger- Severus had a decent sense of humor. When he allowed himself.

‘In all seriousness, Severus, what’s on your mind?’

‘When we do raid the house...’ Snape hesitated. How to say this without damning himself, or the girl? Dumbledore knew, and had offered his sympathies and given Snape the only help he could. *Some help*, he thought irritably. Her mind was completely unchecked, and recent days it seemed to take all his considerable self-control not to seize her as she passed through his door and throw her across his desk.

‘Severus?’ Minerva watched the shadows gathering in his eyes and pity flared in her heart. Was he thinking of Hermione?

His name recalled him. He decided to go with the simplest, most direct, and least risky route possible. If she didn’t know, which was entirely likely, this was not the time to find out. Dumbledore pulled the many strings of a vast web, but McGonagall thought in a more black-

and-white manner, and somehow, Snape thought this would hardly be in keeping with her strictly adhered-to morality- no matter that he had never so much as kissed the girl. 'At the meeting the other night, and in my classes- and even in the library- I have heard some whispering. It would be unthinkable for students to join us in this endeavor. Miss Weasley, Miss Granger and Mister Weasley must not go. They could ruin our chances of succeeding, and this is no mere prophecy game. If the Dark Lord carries out his plan, we have lost.'

*And I want her away from the fighting. I could not bear watching her fight, and fall, as she did in the Department of Mysteries last spring.* It had been bad enough then, feelings mostly submerged, seeing the stretcher, looking at the damage. It burned like fire in his chest- and he wondered how she felt, if he felt it searing. Her collapse in Diagon Alley had been far worse. If not for withstanding years of torture at the hands of his colleagues, he doubted he would have stood through the attack, the violent clutching of his heart not only emotionally but physically as her blood had darkened the bricks...and Hermione... His magic had been so drained there was nothing left to heal her, no help he could offer against the terrible wounds. He did not think he could stand to watch her fall again.

'You want me to ensure their safety, Severus?' McGonagall asked dryly.

'Yes,' Snape pulled himself out of his reverie. 'Or rather,' he corrected swiftly, keeping his character, 'I want you to guarantee that their assured carelessness won't endanger ours.'

Minerva recalled the desperation in his voice when he had begged Albus to allow him to visit Hermione in St. Mungo's. She sighed deeply. There could be no promises. That group of Gryffindors had proven themselves remarkably successful and resourceful when it came to dodging teacher authority and getting away with it because they proved *right*. But the expression on Albus' face when he had described Severus after the battle in Diagon Alley..., the sound of his voice...

'I will do my best, Severus. I will expressly forbid them to go- although Molly's already done that, I don't think my word will help, and I will keep an eye on them when you do leave.'

'Thank you. The distraction and disaster they would bring could be fatal,' he said. The right amount of venom, the correct measure of indifference...McGonagall smiled to herself as he swept down the hall. If she didn't know, she wouldn't have guessed. Which was, she supposed, the point.

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"Neville!" Hermione was not the only girl to leap out of her chair. Ginny, Luna and an assortment of Hufflepuffs also barreled towards him, legs tangling in his cane, carrying him to the floor of the Great Hall in a pile. Hermione found herself squeezing him so tightly she could hear him wheezing for breath, and sat up, her broad smile stretching her face so widely her eyes vanished.

At the table in the Great Hall, Harry heard his best mate's small sigh, and glanced at Ron sidelong as they too stood, affecting more dignity than the girls, but no less glad to see him.

'What?' he murmured, though he rather thought he could guess.

'I wish Hermione would look at me that way,' Ron said. He met Harry's eyes and laughed self-deprecatingly. 'I know, I know. Two and a half months later and I'm still wishing.'

'She would look at you that way. In fact, if you had been in the hospital we would have been to visit you at least twice a week. She does love you, Ron.'

Ron pulled a face, but Harry knew the sentiment was directed inwards, and they had reached Neville, clapping him on the back gently as he rose to his feet, any pain inflicted by the enthusiastic greeting completely covered by the almost unbelieving gratitude at the warmth of his reception.

He was back, October halfway over, with a slight limp. The doctors had assured him that the limp would go away, but the scars where

new knee joints had grown and attached to old thighbones would always exist, the physical markers of a disaster he refused to let cripple him.

How Neville had ended up at the battle scene, Hermione had not known, but her week in the hospital had been nothing compared to his month, the first two weeks spent in Intensive Care.

*'Where's Neville?' Hermione had asked upon her reappearance, peering around their Transfiguration classroom.*

*'He was at the battle,' Ron told her quietly, exhaustion and guilt leaking through his face. Hermione pressed his arm with her fingertips. It wasn't his fault he couldn't help him.*

*'And?' Hermione whispered, her stomach dropping out of her body, nausea roiling into her throat. He can't be dead, she thought frantically. He has to be all right...*

*'His Gran came to Mungo's right after the battle. Mum said she took one look at him and said to the Healers, "I've lost my son and his wife to these monsters. Neville is all I have left. Spare no expense. Heal him."'*

*'And? Is he all right now?'*

*'I don't know. Mum says he's barely alive and still in Intensive Care. They have to re-grow his legs, Hermione.' Ron looked sick. 'I saw him, I visited him after I visited you one day...they were torn and ripped. Like...I don't know what like. If you shredded robes and they bled, you might have an idea of what he looked like. And Dad says he was conscious at the end of the fight, that he didn't black out until Lupin brought him to the hospital.'*

Hermione smiled as she steered him to a seat between her and Harry. He would be all right. The cane, fine as it was, the limp- they might be gone with time and rehabilitation. The Healers had done as his Gran had requested.

### *Two Months Previously...*

Dumbledore pushed his spectacles onto his forehead, covering his eyes as he heaved a sigh. A tense letter born by a night-black raven had forced his hand. He had known and been delaying for over a month now. And even now...

But he opened his eyes to see the deadened stump of his right hand, the ring that had extracted such a price sitting cracked open on top of it. The ring. The diary. The rest of the Horcruxes Harry would have to destroy on his own. He could only help him find it, the destruction of the ring had indicated that his considerable powers were already on the decline, and unlikely to survive a second assault. His withered appendage, resistant to every form of healing attempted by a dozen masters, was the signal. His magic was gradually fading. And the students had to be protected, from threats born both outside and inside Hogwarts. Which meant the war had to be won.

At any price.

He pushed a gold-plated curse-warning ball around his desk with one gnarled finger. The information that the Dark Lord was ready to pursue him through one of his own students had been no surprise, but it had been the catalyst for his decision, the news arriving the same week that destroying the Horcrux had crippled his hand.

A weak leader was no leader at all. But a leader too strong crippled his subordinates. It was time for him to step away from a world that had grown too dependent on his solutions, and if it was going to be this way, so much the better...

A knock on the door. Dumbledore hastily pulled down his spectacles, said "Come in," in his firm, in-control voice, moving papers to look as if he had been busy with minor details instead of lost in musing.

'Headmaster.' Not much for courtesies to be going with, Snape sat in the chair directly opposite the desk and simply skipped to his report. 'The Dark Lord made me privy to a plan not twelve hours ago. I trust you received Nineve?'

‘Yes, your raven carried me the letter.’ There were no further questions.

‘You already knew.’ The headmaster inclined his head, and Snape’s mind clicked furiously into overdrive. He had not informed him, for he had not known a day ago. Of course, any man fool enough to hinge a war on one spy only would find himself on the losing side, but still...

‘Narcissa Malfoy is to visit me tonight. I made arrangements with her. She did not state the reason for her visit, but it can only be for one purpose.’

‘She will ask you to protect her son. And she will bind you to it- she is not a stupid woman, and the many questions her sister Bellatrix casts on your loyalty will not go unheard,’ Dumbledore completed the thought for his Potions master.

‘Yes,’ Snape whispered simply.

‘You will give it to her,’ Dumbledore ordered.

‘I will have little choice if I wish to prove my fealty to the Dark Lord,’ came the bleak response. ‘Headmaster...’ he swallowed past the pain in his throat, throttling the emotion that surged through him, ‘how can I- can we- prepare and protect Miss Granger-’

‘You will not have to.’ The voice was clipped, dry and low. Engrossed in the sudden fear of losing that which he had not really known he wished to keep- his life- Snape nearly didn’t hear him. But as the words took shape, his head snapped to his employer.

‘No. Headmaster-’

‘Silence, Severus, and hear me out. I have many reasons. The Order has ceased to improvise, and so has Harry Potter. They all rely on my answers. On my solutions.’

‘With good reason,’ the younger man interrupted. ‘The instant you were gone from school his very first year, where did Potter go? Down the traps to face the Dark Lord on his own. He should have died. And again last year, when you fled Hogwarts and left us with that awful

woman, he went to the Department of Mysteries, endangering half a dozen others. We need-'

'That's the problem. You think you need me. We cannot win this war if I am the only one in charge.'

'You are the most powerful-'

'Yes, but Severus- I am an old man,' Dumbledore murmured. And for the first time, as the light threw shadows from his raised veins over the papery-thin skin of his hands, lending the lines depth, Snape realized his mentor was ancient. Long past the age that even most wizards lived to, and instead of dwelling in peaceful retirement he was running a school and a war.

'Now, your undivided attention, my friend, if you please,' Dumbledore said softly. 'Time is short, for you must prepare. We know that Tom intends to use Draco Malfoy as the instrument of my destruction. We also both know, as does Narcissa and Tom himself, that Draco could never hope to kill me unless I am extremely weak. He knows that Narcissa's love for her son will drive her to seek help, probably from an old family friend who has been her son's unofficial guardian and one of Tom's most powerful and intelligent followers. I refer, of course, to you. So Tom now has two possible outcomes- either Draco will succeed, or you will. In any event, I end up dead and he has what he wants.'

'I believe Tom is well aware by now of my search for his Horcruxes, and knows that two of them have been found and shattered.'

'He is. It is the reason that he has decided to make you, and not Potter, a top priority. It is also why he has given the task to Draco- it is not entirely a set up to punish Lucius' failure. He is certain that the barriers to the next Horcrux you discover- one within a kind of cave, he would reveal no more than that- will damage you so much that weak though he is, the Malfoy heir will find it possible to slay you.'

'I had surmised as much.' Dumbledore's eyes unfocused slightly, and he gazed out the window, his mouth lifted with no hint of amusement, recognizing his own logic, the trap he had laid for himself and was now springing.



‘Draco Malfoy will not be capable of murder. He is not his father’s son as completely as his appearance would suggest. But what Tom does not know is that in using you to kill me, he will give the Order exactly what it needs to win the war. I will continue my search for this piece of his soul, I will find it, I will deteriorate from whatever spells or poisons safeguard it, and some time after that, Draco will made his move. But whatever happens, Severus, he must not kill me. He must not.’

Snape closed his eyes rather than meet the fierce gaze of his employer. The fire burning in Dumbledore’s eyes was brighter than it had been in ages as he bargained the terms of death.

‘The first reason is the obvious- proving your loyalty to Tom, gaining promotion...you will find it easy to communicate with the Order through Miss Granger-’

‘She will think me a murderer. You cannot ask that of her,’ Snape spat fiercely, rising.

‘I can and I am,’ Dumbledore corrected. ‘You are bonded to her for better or worse, Severus, and she will hurt regardless of whether you are betraying Tom through her or not. The second reason,’ he continued over Snape’s open mouth and faint noise of objection, ‘is to do with Transference.’

The Potions master’s mouth snapped shut audibly.

‘I trust you know what that is.’

‘You know I do. It is one of the Dark Lord’s favorite, and exclusive, tricks.’

‘I would not have- in case I am wrong, in the event that Draco is indeed more like Lucius than I believe he is- I would not have him drain the little of my ability that would transfer to him.’ The smile that twisted Snape’s mouth made Dumbledore arch an eyebrow. ‘The Dark Lord will authorize the use of such a spell?’

‘I know he will. It is too much to allow you to slip from this world without stealing some minute portion of your power.’

'I know. And it must be you who takes it- and only the executioner can cast the spell on the victim.'

The clock ticked over the mantle as Snape sank down and turned the argument over in his mind, insides growing heavier with each *click* that the silver second hand made as it tocked towards the hour. Dumbledore's reasoning was flawless. It was clear that he was declining, though his sweeping robes and altered gestures distracted from the physical embodiment of his failing health. His death at Snape's hands would bring Snape trust and honor within the Death Eater circle previously denied him.

He thought ironically that perhaps eighteen years ago he would have died to be in this position, ready to deliver the greatest threat to his lord to the land of the dead. How different it was this way.

'Severus. This is not a request. This is an order,' Dumbledore said firmly.

'I know,' Snape replied and looked at his mentor squarely. 'Might I have a single bargaining chip?'

'What?'

'The Defense Against the Dark Arts job?'

Dumbledore stared at him, and then, startled by the seeming inanity of the request in light of their discussion, burst into laughter. Snape did not laugh, but he did smile and there were equal parts amusement and pain reflected there.

'You will hardly be returning upon my death. Very well. That solves that problem for at least another year.'

Snape stood, nodded his head respectfully, and left, closing the door, his fears, and the growing sense of self-loathing preying on his mind inside the office at the top of spiral stone stairs.

Hermione gasped, one hand gripping her abdomen, a feeling of emotional pain so raw flooding her it took her breath away. She bent over her work table, left arm locked and trembling, tears flooding to her eyes and dripping in growing puddles on the wood.

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‘Professor.’ He stopped in the doorway, inundated with longing, his eyes playing scenes of crossing the room in long strides and gathering her into his arms...

Hermione had been standing in the Potions lab one more time. She knew it was absurd, that she could brew potions at Hogwarts, but she felt as if she were leaving part of herself behind in the cauldrons that would continue to merrily bubble and brew without her. Snape’s entrance had been quiet as always, but she had been well-prepared for it. Today, they would return to Hogwarts, and somehow, she had no doubt that he would return this morning as well, the first time he set foot in the lab in three weeks.

With him came the same, powerful sense of sorrow, the aching echo of the hurt she had channeled two weeks before. She had no knowledge of what had transpired, but it had been so violent that she had felt it from wherever he had been.

‘You are improving,’ was all that he said. As usual, she could sense his mind’s presence, but not specifics. He had an iron control over his thought that left his mind a wall- present, but impenetrable.

‘Hardly. Your mind announced your arrival,’ she replied, carefully not turning to gaze at him, as if by denying herself that simplicity she could disperse her desire to do so.

The sun had barely awakened, the bright yellow of morning slanting sideways through the trees, leaving most of the room cast in shadow.

*Look at me*, the request echoed, and she immediately obeyed.

Her eyes were clearing from the glare of new-born sunlight, and she found herself lost in the luxury of looking at him. The fierce face, now

relaxed, the proud, thin mouth gentle, hair soft and swung forward to shadow the hooked nose.

How had she ever feared and loathed this man?

Snape swore softly, whether from her physical or emotional reaction she could not tell, and his mind closed to her instantly again. 'That was a weakness, Miss Granger. You must learn to distinguish them and not obey them.' He glanced away from her. 'You also paint a remarkable portrait of me. You may wish to review the facts for their veracity.' She smiled.

'It is what I see. And I daresay you wish for things a great deal more embarrassing than a glance, Professor?' It was flip, but it bothered her that he could close his mind, while she lacked the skill- and the way of gaining it. The only other Occlumens she knew was the Headmaster, and the idea of asking him for lessons for this reason made her blush.

'No. That would not be wise,' he replied to her thought quietly.

'Will you miss it?' she asked him. She could feel, in spite of his barriers, that he did miss it already, had missed her during his self-imposed absence.

'I have my own at Hogwarts.' *What will we do at Hogwarts?* she wanted to ask, but stilled herself, knowing that with only fifteen feet between them to think was too ask, and he made no vocal reply, but the question did not go unanswered.

*I don't know.* There was a vague bleakness around the answer that came from his mind, and she realized no little amount of dread. She blinked, feeling the sting, and almost as quickly, winging from his thoughts, *Don't be ridiculous. I only fear for your safety.*

It was true, though not the whole truth, and Hermione wondered if he had learned something she hadn't, but he gave her a stiff look that made it clear that he would not reply before he seized a few books from the shelf and disappeared down the stairs.

It never failed to amaze Hermione the frantic way the Burrow operated when getting ready to depart for Hogwarts. Their trunks had supposedly been packed the night before, but another pair of socks, shorts, boxers, robes, journals, quills and owl treats were always discovered in the most unlikely places in the morning as they jostled past each other, robes half-closed and shoes trailing laces while the partially eaten toast in the other hand shed crumbs slathered in butter everywhere.

Hermione sipped coffee, read the *Prophet* and laughed softly as she watched a heckled Mrs. Weasley soundly reprimand Ron, Ginny and even Harry for their untidiness.

But Harry's status as Boy Savior, now "The Chosen One" in the *Prophet's* most recent articles, allowed them certain leeway. The Ministry had sent cars, the Auror Core and members of the Order were standing by to help, and the Hogwarts Express was essentially guaranteed not to take off without him. This made Ron feel as if he should be allowed to eat his oatmeal without hopping up and down on one foot while trying to put on a shoe at the same time.

'But Mum, it's not as if they'll leave without us.'

'You know very well that Harry is what matters here,' Mrs. Weasley snapped, 'and just because he happens to be in an inordinate amount of danger doesn't mean you should take advantage of the situation by making us late. Put your other shoe on, Ronald, so I can tie them!'

But as usual, they made it to King's Cross with ten minutes to spare-making Hermione wonder if Mrs. Weasley set all of her clocks (or at least those that actually told time) fifteen minutes fast, for the drive from Ottery Saint-Catchpole to King's Cross should have taken a great deal longer than the five minutes it appeared to have required, even with the help of magic.

They found their compartment to drop their stuff, then Hermione and Ron walked to the prefect's car to start their assignments. Hermione still savored the returned friendship, his determination to patch what they had very nearly ruined clear as every so often he would deliberately lean over and bump her shoulder, then crook his mouth

in his trademark half-smile, which she returned. He had made their resolution clear that last month, and the family had gradually warmed to her again.

As they slumped back on their seats to ride the rest of the way to Hogwarts, Hermione grabbed a Potions book, ignoring the rolled eyes of her two best friends as she delved into a treatise.

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'I'm starved.' Harry jumped off the train, offering Ginny his hand to step down. Ron copied him, and Hermione laughed as she placed her hand in his and he settled her on the platform with a flourish. Talking eagerly about the coming feast, and teasing about enslaved hours-elves, the four of them came round the bend.

Hermione gasped.

The thestrals were bright in the dying sunlight, their wings spread proudly. 'You can see them,' Harry stated.

'Yes.'

'The thestrals?' Ron asked. 'But...why?'

'Artie Pincer died in the infirmary this summer while I was helping Madam Pomfrey re-stock,' Hermione recalled distantly. 'I was in there with her when he started hacking and then just...stopped.'

'I can see them too,' Ginny murmured, frowning.

'What?' Ron yelped. 'When did you see someone die? How?'

'I was in the room at the Department of Mysteries when Sirius died,' Ginny snapped. 'If you want that memory, you're more than welcome to it.'

'I don't,' Ron assured his little sister. 'I just don't want you hurt, Gin. Or around...that.'

'I'm a big girl, Ron,' she replied, but without rancor.

'I know.' They had stopped in the road, allowing the other students to flow around them like water around stone. 'Well, thestrals or no, shall we get in?' he asked. 'We're not going to eat out here.'

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When they entered the hall to sit down, Hermione felt the Headmaster's gaze fall on them, but she was far more attuned to the sallow-faced Potions Professor. Her sharp awareness of him had appeared as she walked into the castle, catching her breath briefly as he simply reappeared. Her eyes swept the head table, finding his for just an instant. His expression was fathomless, black eyes unreadable. Her stomach twisted. Professor and student. He missed nothing. He had to have seen her. But nothing in his gaze indicated it, and she swallowed before letting her eyes move along the rest of the table, seeking the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

It was a roly-poly little man, sitting at his ease and sweeping his eyes over the hall, stopping occasionally, interest flashing as he recognized students- sons and daughters of people he knew, perhaps? Hermione knew nothing about his except that Harry had gone to see him and persuade him to teach. Return to teaching, from what Dumbledore had told him.

First years were nudging each other and pointing at them. Hermione glanced around, looked at the awe on one young face, and followed her gaze to one of her best friends. She smiled. 'Harry, they're already queuing up to meet you.'

His green eyes tracked her gaze and he grimaced. 'Oh. Thrilling.' They sat. The first years entered, and they applauded those added to their house, Ron and Harry both fidgeted waiting for Dumbledore to finish his requisite speech.

At the end of the speech, Dumbledore turned to face the round man, gesturing for him to rise. 'As you all know, the continuing need for new teachers keeps Hogwarts on it's toes-' a surge of triumph flared in Hermione that even Snape couldn't quell. Her eyes instantly went from the Headmaster to his neutral face. But the near-boredom on his face belied his intense feeling of victory, '-and this year I am pleased

to welcome back to Hogwarts one of my older associates, Professor Horace Slughorn, teaching Potions.'

One or two hands came together as the short man rose, and stopped. The murmur rippled through the Hall. 'Potions?' At the table, Snape too was rising, neutrality vanished in his pleased sneer.

'With Horace back to fill his old position, Professor Snape will be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts.'

'No!' Harry's violent cry was not the only one, but it was by far the loudest as he shot to his feet. The smirk on Snape's face, if anything, widened, and the gloating of Slytherin House rolled from their table in a wave. 'He'll ruin everything,' Harry moaned, sinking into his chair under the stern eye of all assembled teachers. Dumbledore looked disappointed, while McGonagall's expression promised some retribution.

'Harry, it'll be all right,' she whispered, acutely aware of Snape's pleasure at finally having been accorded the job he had always wanted and would do the best. And yet... she could feel the hesitancy there as well. While his face told of his pride, the same prickly, almost sorrowful feeling that she had felt two weeks ago crept into it. What was bothering him?

The thought was too direct. She felt his attention focus on the emotional leak, and he locked his mind away once more.

Hermione found the Hogwarts fare somewhat lacking after months of Mrs. Weasley's cooking, and she stirred her mashed potatoes. Harry also seemed to have lost his appetite, and glowered instead at his plate, puncturing his steak and kidney pie with no little amount of venom. Hermione found that here, surrounded by her classmates, she missed Snape more than her three weeks alone in the Burrow. The lab had been theirs, permeated by him even when he was not there. But the Great Hall and indeed the whole school, was public, open. She did not dare risk even looking at the head table. He had not turned a glance in her direction, even when noticing her mental attention, and she hadn't expected him to. She knew he did not expect her to mind him.



A feeling of intense loneliness filled her. She watched Parvati flirting with Seamus, hands playing, resting so near each other they almost brushed, then moved, her brown eyes dancing as they laughed together. But Hermione would never have that. No touch, no holding, no smiling. That road led them nowhere good- into a passion it had taken all of his considerable iron will to control. And she would be restricted to seeing him in class, where he could read her mind without effort and indeed, without thinking. It took effort for him *not* to read her mind.

‘Hermione?’ Ron interrupted her musings.

‘Hmm?’

‘You okay?’ he asked gently. Harry was now spearing peas on a fork, and Hermione knew that neither needed to ask him.

‘Yeah. Just tired.’

‘Me too.’ Silence, and then, ‘Snape’s teaching Dark Arts. I guess the best we can hope is that the curse claims him too.’

Hermione froze, panic overriding sense as she assimilated Ron’s offhand joke. Curse. The job was cursed- or at least, that was the rumor. And so far it had proven true for every single teacher. Was that the reason for his trepidation? Why the victory contained a shadow of what could be dread, or could be sorrow? Instinctively, she looked to him, and though she knew he could hear her thoughts, she received no reply- mental or physical, in indicate that he had heard, or cared.

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Snape closed the door to his chambers with considerable relief, massaging his temples as he slumped in his armchair, bereft of the desire to do anything- even lift his wand and set the cold fireplace alight.

Distance had allowed him an illusion that dinner in the Great Hall had sundered completely. He had been able to feel the girl’s approach a good hour before the arrival of the Hogwarts Express, and by the time

she had entered the castle, the fine variations of her mood reflected in his mind, requiring much of his attention to be diverted to keeping his own head closed to her.

But penetrating above all else had been a fierce apprehension. Anxiety about him, about what he would think, how he would act. He had been flattered and slightly surprised to realize how much the young witch's thoughts centered around him. He knew his own strayed to her dangerously often, but somehow he had imagined that her thoughts of him were limited to when he was in view and able to read them.

*What will we do at Hogwarts?* He didn't know. The effort to keep his mental barriers in place at least eighteen hours a day would be exhausting. And it was clear that any thought he had of occasionally dropping them could have disastrous results. Now, with nearly the entirety of the castle between them, she had returned to a low-level hum, pulsing and present, but not overwhelming. But in the Great Hall... *How can I teach with the girl no more than thirty feet from me?*

He swore softly in the dark, cursing himself for the impulse that had driven him to see her that morning, one last time standing alone in the room that retained the warmth of their closeness. One more time watching the rising sun crown her hair, turning unruly light brown locks become a blazing aurora. Once more to see, to feel, to persuade himself that something other than the ever-present foreign mind at the back of his own had been forged in that room.

But so seeing her, his desire had rushed into him, a broken dam flooding a river, worse than it ever had been before. He recalled the Headmaster's warning that it would grow far worse and a smile without any mirth curved his mouth. If the pressure of his desire steadily increased, he would be incapable of holding 'til Christmas, much less the end of the year.

## Defenses

Snape stood at his ease in the circle of Death Eaters. He had discovered the careful arrangement of his limbs that made him look confident- it kept his compatriots off their guard, for few of them appeared as relaxed in the presence of the Dark Lord, and it pleased Voldemort in some indefinable way, power mirroring power. And it gave him time to think.

Ten days. It was October twenty-first, and he had ten days before the ceremony. That was likely to be the next time he was back. Potter would have to be rescued tonight. He stuck his hand into his pocket and touched the lemon sherbert given to him by the headmaster. He felt it heat briefly.

*'When you activate it, give us half an hour. I will summon everyone going, and all will be in position for you to free the boy then.'*

Dumbledore would be ready. In half an hour, Snape had to find a way to get hold of Harry Potter and free him without looking suspicious- and carefully plant the seeds to place the blame somewhere else.

Lucius was too unbelievable a target, Rookwood and Macnair not trusted enough... Wormtail. Snape smiled coldly behind his mask, grateful that no one was looking at him as Avery conversed with their lord. Wormtail owed the brat his life, Potter had saved him in the Shrieking Shack from Black and Lupin. And Wormtail possessed a treacherous nature. It would be perfectly understandable if Potter escaped into the hands of Albus Dumbledore at Wormtail's bidding.

'Severus!' He strode forward at the sound of his name, used exclusively in the private company of the Inner Circle, sinking to one knee and bowing his head to the warped wooden floor.

'I am here, my lord.'

'I know you are,' Voldemort said lazily, his cold voice slow. 'Come forward.' Snape stood and covered the rest of the distance.

'Come with me.' The two left the room. The rest of the Death Eaters knew to wait for them to return. They walked the creaking, ancient

halls of the Riddle House. Both men found their way in the dark blindly without effort. They were at home in darkness, accustomed to the swallowing black that had long concealed and consumed them.

‘How has your research been coming?’

‘Well, my lord,’ Snape replied.

‘And? Is there any reason at all that I cannot do as I plan?’ They stopped near the door, the moonlight shed enough to see faces, and Voldemort was turned so that his livid red eyes could glare into Snape’s black ones as the latter shook his head.

Snape obediently opened his mind, handing his lord the memories of long hours of research, deftly shunting those precious hours with Hermione beside him out of his reach.

‘I tell you the truth,’ Snape said after Voldemort withdrew his mind, satisfied. ‘I am no traitor like Wormtail to conceal some special magic or trap from you.’ Snape hesitated just the right amount of time before adding: ‘And speaking of Wormtail, my lord, I think we may have some trouble brewing.’

‘What kind of trouble?’ Voldemort’s lazy drawl had been the end of many a careless man. The absolute unruffled appearance of a casual, noncommittal lord meant that Snape had his ear completely- but would not be privy to any reaction.

‘He is bound to the Potter boy. As you must know, Potter saved his life two and a half years ago. I would merely advise that we keep him as far from the Samhain proceedings as possible.’

Voldemort nodded. ‘A wise precaution. One I intended to take anyway. It is good that you thought to warn me. But what, my faithful servant, made you think of it now?’

‘Desire to see you succeed at last, and knowledge of what could potentially, whatever the unlikelihood, bring us to failure. Wormtail can serve you faithfully where Potter is not involved. When he is, it becomes tricky. Potter is key to your strength, now, my lord, and we have him in custody. At Samhain, he will die. Wormtail will be forced

to act if he is present. That is all, my lord. I mean no intentional disrespect to your servant.'

'As usual, you have done your studying,' Voldemort said idly. He smiled at the younger man, young enough to be his son. His heart had blackened indeed when Lucius Malfoy had told him that Severus Snape had betrayed him. But that had simply been Lucius angling for first position again. He had never forgiven the boy, five years his junior, for stealing his glory and power as the Dark Lord's right hand man.

For Severus had returned to him dutifully, kissed his robe and reeked of remorse for believing him dead and delaying him in getting the Philosopher's Stone. And now, when Narcissa had run to him for help, he had dedicated himself to a bond readily and willing, a bond requiring him to kill Albus Dumbledore...no, no traitor this. His assassin's readiness to continue serving had thawed the top layer of ice over his newly-beating heart.

'As for Wormtail, he will be handled, Severus. Have no fear of that.'

'At your command, my lord,' Snape murmured deferentially. With the Dark Lord it was always a game...but one that left occasionally him with a terrible feeling of guilt. Voldemort invested little emotion in other people- they were too fickle, too disappointing and too dispensable. But Snape knew, with the surety granted to a practiced Legilimens, that Voldemort trusted him, especially now, with a completeness and respect granted to few others. Dumbledore wasn't his only adopted father. This powerful and power-hungry man with red eyes and pale skin who had taught him the meaning of learning *everything* about magic and men was the other. The one he would kill for.

'Come. In I must go and return to my waiting Death Eaters,' Voldemort sighed, and Snape winced. There was, occasionally, an air of melancholy about his lord that made the man almost human. Snape followed his lord inside, casting a look over his shoulder at the gravestones that glowed white with the moon, regretting the end of the peace. The Dark Lord in good humor was a rare thing these days.

And Potter's escape would doubtless send him into brooding punctuated by rages.

He sighed internally. Twenty-five minutes. How was he going to get Potter out?

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Dumbledore felt the lemon sherbert in his pocket heat. 'He is summoning us,' he said softly, closing his book.

'Severus?' Minerva asked from the armchair across from him.

'Yes. He'll have the boy out in a half hour. Kindly alert the Order. I am going to my position.'

'Albus, be careful.' She knew she hardly needed to give him warning, but it always felt good to remind him.

'Of course.' He Disapparated, and Minerva Flooed the Burrow, where the guard was waiting.

'Severus just called Albus. The escape will be under way in thirty minutes,' her head told Molly.

'Get ready to move out!' she heard Alastor roar as she pulled her head back out of the fire. She retired to her armchair, but the book no longer held any interest for her, so she rose and paced instead.

It was going to be a long night.

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*Seven Weeks Prior...*

The N.E.W.T. level Defense Against the Dark Arts class was scheduled for Wednesday and Friday afternoons. With the Slytherins. Harry and Ron groaned. Hermione ignored them.

'You're lucky he's teaching Defense,' she snapped tartly as they continued complaining. 'Where you both got an 'O'. You wouldn't be in Potions if Professor Snape were still teaching it.'

‘Yeah, I guess. But at least Potions was never my favorite subject,’ Harry groused.

‘Think about it- at least you’re good at it,’ Ron offered. ‘He won’t be able to take as many points off.’

Hermione barely heard them. Her heart was in her throat, hammering hard. She had no idea what he would do, how he would act. Her rational mind promised that he would be the same cold man he had always been, but the part of her that had imprinted the searing sweetness of his touch in her body memory prayed that something of their summer would glitter in his eyes. The longing, and the guilt from knowing that she should not long, tore at her as they queued outside the door. She had spent years dreading the moments required in his presence, but she had never been more apprehensive about them than today.

The door opened, the pressure of his mind twined with hers grew infinitesimally greater as the class entered and crossed to what were, by now, their customary seats, Hermione at the center of the cluster of Gryffindors as usual.

It was the first time he had seen her up close for two days, and Snape was relieved to see her eyes fixed firmly on her books, he could feel her embarrassment, her guilt...but the raw need pulsating through her blood keyed to his body, and he felt with horror his only partially-unwilling rise to the occasion.

‘You have all...achieved,’ he bit the last word, and Hermione lifted her head to see him glowering at Harry and Ron, pointedly not at her, who were scowling right back, ‘N.E.W.T.s level in this class. Understand that I will no longer coddle you through this as your previous professors may have done.’

‘Coddle?’ Ron snorted and Harry was nodding his agreement.

‘Mister Weasley, this class is not taught by committee nor did I state a desire for your agreement of this opinion. Ten points from Gryffindor,’ Snape said softly. ‘This is an advanced level research and application class. You will be researching and mastering individually assigned counter-curses and creatures. It will ensure,’ his black eyes glittered

as they narrowed at Harry and Ron, 'that there is no cheating or reliance on those more intelligent than you to pass this course.' His eyes glazed over Hermione, settling on Draco, sitting at the front of the class and paying polite attention.

'To get your hands back in practice, today you will handle a variety of different curses and repel them using a shield charm. You have an hour to read, partner and practice.'

Hermione opened her copy of *Advanced Defense* and turned to the correct page. Harry and Ron both copied her, eyes skimming the pages. It was all information that all three knew and had previously employed. She could not stop the smugness at knowing he could not fault their performance.

The girl's confidence infuriated him, and the flashing of his eyes told Hermione so as he swept over to them. 'I daresay our resident Know-It-All can do it perfectly after a short read. Show us all your expertise in *this* subject, Miss Granger.'

Hermione lifted her head and her wand, trying to keep herself from panic, assuming a dueling stance across from Harry. No sooner had she shifted on the balls of her feet when a curse lanced towards her-directed not from Harry but from her professor. But his mind was not so closed that she could not read his intent from three feet away. Her hasty '*Protego!*' rebounded the curse perfectly, forcing him to step aside lest he be struck with his own spell.

Her eyes turned on him, and the heat of the rage pouring into him from the girl only a few steps away widened his eyes, almost imperceptibly, and he struggled to hold his tongue. He dared not snap at her, fueling the anger threatening to override him. He backed away, the physical distance relieving just minutely her feelings of fury and injustice. It was a powerful insight as to what his students thought of him, what she thought in particular, and for a moment, he was appalled at the person he glimpsed in her mind.

But that could not last. Her rapid deflection of the curse aimed to humiliate undermined his authority- and the longer he waited to do what the class knew was coming, the worse it would get. 'Very lucky, Miss Granger,' he hissed. 'Since your command is so excellent and



your language so verbose, I'm sure you wouldn't mind writing six rolls of parchment on the subject by next class, would you?' Sniggers from the Slytherins.

*You bloody bastard!* The thought echoed violently, and he rounded on her. For an instant the world narrowed to the two of them, brown eyes and black locked in equal wrath-

-only to be replaced by something new welling within and flowing between both of them. Snape hurriedly tore his gaze away before it softened with craving, Hermione's fury already ebbing in the face of a far more powerful emotion. As he returned to his desk, he was aware of the stillness of the room, the unique silence of people staring avidly, the tense waiting to see what would happen next.

'I believe you all have work to do?' His voice was sibilant, and in unison, heads bent back towards books, eyes sought partners and wands were drawn. But nothing could halt the darting glances, the Slytherins were watching their professor with curiosity, the Gryffindors watching Hermione with amusement, awe and confusion. Something had transpired that no one in the room understood- the anger raw in both faces as they had stared at each other after his outrageous assignment, and his decision to step away rather than give her detention.

It had been his first thought- then he had recalled why it was that he had stopped going to the Burrow to begin with, and knew that especially now, four hours alone in a room with her would be either bliss at the price of nightmarish guilt, or an evening of slow, almost inexplicable torture- him grading papers and her doing some mild, menial task not fit for her brain, both of them slower by effort of studiously reigning emotions both theirs and not theirs.

And Snape truly did not know which scenario would win.

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'You've really done a number on Snape this year, Hermione,' Ron said in wonderment as they exited the classroom, the Gryffindors bunched around her. 'You aren't afraid of him at all.'

'He doesn't have the right to act this way all the time,' she spat. He had deliberately chosen to pick on her because he *knew* how much his opinion meant to her, how desperately she wanted to see approval in his eyes, now more than ever.

And yet...it was more than that. She knew in some way that she did indeed have his approval- complete, unconstrained, unconditional. No, the true anger came from the fact that he had been testing both of them. She smiled in grim satisfaction. She was fairly certain that at least both of them had failed.

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Snape awakened mouth dry and tongue heavy, as if he had been running...no...

He closed his eyes again and shut his mouth, swallowing and trying not to recall the all-too-vivid dream. But the stickiness of his nether region did not permit him to simply close his mind and return to sleep.

Summoning his robe, he stumbled to the bathroom to clean himself, sharp loathing rising with bile in his throat. Dreaming of a student. He had never dreamt of his students, even in the most mundane way, and a dream that involved this student, and so much of her skin, soft and hot, key parts tender and swollen from their exertion...

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Hermione did not know one could wake with such an intense feeling of mortification. She had often come out of sleep terrified, joyous, exhausted like she'd been running- but never embarrassed. She could *feel* her professor against her, inside her, the sparse and rough black hairs of his chest tickling her, the swift, caressing movements of his fingers...she shivered pleasurably, and thought, with equal amounts of pleasure and shame, that she would never be able to look at those callused, capable hands again. She had never had such a dream about someone her own age, but this one had been so real- she ached with a desire for release, the warmth turning into frustration as her body finally understood that no such release would be forthcoming.

Dreams...the faint pressure at the back of her mind was sharper and the variations of his emotions flowed into her. He, too, was awake...and unguarded. As self-loathing reared its head, another, terrible thought occurred to her.

She knew that now she was blushing in the darkness of her bedroom. Had he seen that dream? Had they shared it?

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They had been at school for a week- Hermione had dutifully done her added assignment and silently handed it in. Keeping her mind in order in his class was difficult, but he did not come near her again, and she was both relieved and disappointed. For a passion that had to remain unconsummated, she found her thoughts turned increasingly to him, paying attention out of the corner of her eye to his habits and to the flashes of information that came with even the slight relaxation of his Occlumency-gained shields.

That night, as she was looking up the conjunction of Mercury and Venus' orbits for calculations of star runes, she felt her left wrist sear. A short cry of pain escaped her mouth, attracting stares from around the common room, and bringing Ron, Harry and Ginny to her side.

'Hermione?' The deep caring that Ron still nursed for her shone in his large eyes. His hand traveled to where her right hand had convulsively grabbed her wrist and prized her fingers off.

The skin was smooth, unbroken.

'What happened? Are you hurt?'

'No,' she whispered, as panic seized her. Snape. That was the only possible explanation for the abrupt pain where a Dark Mark would be branded- if she had had one. She stood suddenly.

'Hermione?' the three rose with her.

'I just- I forgot- I have to go see Professor Dumbledore.' It was not a credible lie, her unfocused eyes glittered wildly, panic evident in her suddenly-hitched breathing. Their bond had not lent her Snape's

sense of bending the truth, but she was not concerned with that as she massaged the knotting tendons in her wrist, already halfway to the exit. They left her alone to race across the common room and out the portrait, watching her with baffled expressions.

‘She left everything here.’ The worry in Harry’s voice was evident as he looked over the books and note-filled parchment, Hermione’s cramped, neat handwriting legible only at nose-length. But the disarray of the table was unlike their friend. She had always kept scrupulous care of everything she owned that even remotely pertained to the academic world.

‘Anybody else have the feeling she’s not telling us something?’ Ron asked, his eyes still on the closing portrait.

‘Something important,’ Ginny agreed.

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Out of breath from panic and speed, Hermione halted in her dash to the Headmaster’s office only when she reached the gargoyle and realized that she did not have the password. She stared at it mutely, left arm still tingling with the after-effects of the summons, praying for it to open to her. The number of sweets in the wizarding world far outweighed her patience to stand here guessing.

But perhaps Professor McGonagall...She resolutely started down the corridor to find her Head of House.

‘What is it, Miss Granger?’ McGonagall rose from her desk instantly as the girl entered. The fear in her eyes stalled questions, and the older woman did not even think to reprimand her student for charging in without knocking.

‘I need to speak with the headmaster,’ Hermione told her.

McGonagall was around the desk in an instant, reached to put an arm around the girl’s shoulders, and saw her rubbing her left arm.

‘Are you hurt?’ she asked gently, without thinking. Her student shot her a glance of pure terror, dropping her right arm immediately. There were no marks-

McGonagall paled. ‘Come with me,’ she ordered. Hermione obeyed without question, turning and following her professor back down the corridor that she had just come from.

‘Ice Mice,’ she snapped tersely. The gargoyle sprang aside and they were both on the moving staircase.

At the top of the stairs, McGonagall rapped on the oak smartly, and faced Hermione with features much softer than the hard planes and lines that characterized her teaching persona. ‘Miss Granger...’ and she hesitated. She wasn’t supposed to know. What comfort could she offer the girl? What consolation would Hermione be capable of hearing? Her fear for the man gone was too all-consuming, the horrors of what he would face too violently imaginable for gentle words to take their place in her mind’s eye.

The door opened, her husband sparing her the need to say anything. She settled for a squeeze of the girl’s shoulder, applying slight pressure to push her into the office at the same time.

‘Miss Granger needs to speak with you, Albus.’

Dumbledore nodded, leading her in, the door closing on his wife’s already retreating back. ‘By all means, Miss Granger, please sit,’ he motioned her to a chair. She remained standing as he went around his desk and seated himself, her hands clasped behind her back rigidly, legs slightly apart in a conscious imitation of military attention.

She had wondered, interspersed with bouts of mind-rending fear, what she could say to him. He clearly knew, had known before either his employee or student had. He also knew, beyond a doubt, where he was this evening. She would not need to tender explanations.

‘Professor Dumbledore,’ and she was surprised to hear her voice ringing in the silence, reflected from the windows, ‘I am reporting for duty.’

He stared at her, and though a smile twinged the corner of his mouth, she saw no echo of it in his eyes.

For his part, the ancient wizard gazed into the pained dark eyes of a girl without whom they likely would not win the war, and hated himself. Not yet seventeen. But she knew what she was required to do, and knew too that he would ask it of her. So she had come, trained with her friends to his hand. Dumbledore's Army indeed.

'Is he all right, sir?' she asked into the silence, as it took too long for him to speak.

'You tell me, Miss Granger,' he replied evenly. He could not make this easier for her now. His error in not telling Harry all that he should have known years before had been paid for by who knew how many lives. Hermione Granger was strong enough to hold her own, and he had to make sure he knew it now, in less than a year. Less than a year. This day would soon seem blissfully easy by comparison.

Hermione was startled that Dumbledore made no attempt to answer her, but had referred it back to her, no explaining, no excusing. And she understood as she looked into the blue eyes that held kindness without twinkle, firmness without mercy, that the headmaster was not looking at Hermione the student, but Hermione the adult.

There was no thrill in knowing that the greatest wizard of the age regarded her not as one of his vast army of children, but as an individual. If anything, the weight she carried suddenly bowed her shoulders. She was responsible for the life of the most dangerous, most intelligent and most ruthless member of the Order.

She hurtled mentally down the path that Snape's mind had worn in hers, and with careful concentration she felt... nothing. His barriers combined with physical distance to completely eliminate all but the imprint, the awareness of him in her mind.

Panic returned full force. 'I don't know.'

'Then none of us can say,' Dumbledore's voice calmed her from habit, but his words were not soothing, nor did his expression convey confidence of Snape's well-being. She would have no cushion, no

half-truths, evasions or reassurances. Not tonight, and thought she did not yet know it, never again.

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Hermione winced in pain as the barriers came down, throbbing spreading down her arms, tip-toeing across her back, sliding down her hips and legs, setting her nerves on edge, the physical equivalent to nails dragged over a blackboard, causing acute discomfort, but lacking the brutality of what he was feeling.

McGonagall watched her closely as the girl squirmed. She had been in her Head of House's office most of the night, waiting for Snape. She had found herself not one jot tired, only fearful, as the tick-tock of the clock passed midnight, then one, then three...

A final jolt of pain pitched Hermione out of her chair, to her knees-consuming her, blinding and deafening her...

'Miss Granger! Hermione!' McGonagall seized her arms, sitting her up. The girl was gagging with the force of the adopted pain and the Transfiguration teacher cursed. Of course they hadn't thought of this, her incapacitation through the growing strength of the bond...

'Hermione, you have to stop the pain,' she ordered gently, kneeling next to her. Tears poured down her student's face, and Hermione shook her head, unable to breathe, unable to think, unable to move.

'You have to,' her teacher murmured, pulling the unruly tangle of hair away from Hermione's face. 'You have to come with me. You have to heal him.'

Hermione dimly heard her professor through the roaring, the raw sensation brought with his arrival in the castle. She seized that fact, clutched at his mind, now open and fully revealed...

'Lucius Malfoy,' she whispered, the first of the jumbled thoughts she was hearing. 'Lucius Malfoy is out of Azkaban. He tortured-' her breathing was labored, but the hatred in her eyes sharpened undeniably, making the black center of her pupils blaze. Stilted and slow, she stood, and started out the door, her professor at her side.

Hermione gripped the hatred, the power of it kept the pain at bay, gave her the will to walk with bloodied and beaten feet up the staircases and through the hallways to the hospital wing.

The white ward was before them, the door opened, and Hermione slumped on the doorframe, hatred vanishing with need, mercilessly driving herself to perform. And the magic twisted in streams of blue-white from her heart, her throat and her abdomen towards Snape, lying awake, red staining the sheets beneath him, gazing at her with his heart in his eyes, the only thing he could see through his blood-sullied vision.

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'Minerva, would you say something to them? Anything at all will do,' Dumbledore said quietly. The sagging black loops under his eyes as he laid Hermione on the bed next to her bond-mate elicited her pity, and Minerva touched his shoulder.

'I will.'

For Hermione's magical outburst had awakened the entire staff and brought them pounding to the hospital wing. Elsewhere in the school, students woke and rolled over uncomfortably, the dim feeling of a power that was both inexplicable and utterly uncontrolled washing through and over them.

Harry stirred in his bed, his scar soothing for a moment from the constant ache it endured now that Voldemort was strong again, and thought of Hermione. She had not been back after her hasty departure. His debate to rise and seek her out was stifled by sleep. Perhaps she really had gone to see the headmaster, and had gotten back late.

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Snape woke, feeling tender and sore, but no worse than that and easily much better than he ever had post-torture before. He groaned a little. Lucius and Walden's predilection for using knives...and they had been oh-so-careful to leave him just conscious and able enough to Apparate. Their lord would not have been pleased if he had died,



especially since this session had not been done on the lord's orders but simply for private fun...

Relief that was not his own bubbled in his chest, and he turned over to see Hermione Granger lying on the next bed, watching him, his mind completely unguarded-

-the rush of love and gratitude that burned through his mind and into hers made her blush and beam. Snape only barely caught himself in time as his mouth longed to twitch upwards as well. Without thinking, she reached for him, rising to walk towards him, and as if in a mirror, his hand extended to match, their fingers meeting, skimming over each other, slipping past palms, caressing skin exposed by their hospital gowns. He closed his eyes as her second hand joined the first, rose to his chin, brushed his thin mouth, explored for the first time with fingertips only just developing calluses.

The contact did for them what distance never could. It brought the harmony of feeding a craving, their desire no less, but seeming more tamed as long as he could feel her skin beneath his hands...

He had ceased breathing, and so had she, the peculiar feeling of double arousal- hers and his own, pervading him and heightening it. His caress turned to a clasp, and she willingly moved forward, swaying closer to him, allowing him to reach more of her, any of her that he wished to touch-

He snatched his hands away from her and slammed his wards back in place. When he opened his eyes again, she was back on her bed, eyes flat with stress and tension. He sensed neither resentment nor disappointment from her, but a frustration so compelling he nearly crossed to kiss her, if only to lay it to rest.

*Do not blame yourself*, she warned as he angrily thrust the curtains around his bed closed to dress.

*Then whom should I blame?* And from her silence, he did not know whether she had heard the livid question or not.

## Diagon Alley

Hermione sat frozen once again, stock-still in a chair in the common room, Ginny, Ron and Neville close at hand. The fight at Diagon Alley and losing Harry had forged the four into an inseparable and dangerous cluster. Pansy Parkinson's single ambush attempt to mock Hermione and Ron had turned into a trip to the hospital wing for her, Crabbe and Goyle, and a mere twenty-point reduction for each of the four Gryffindor students involved. That they had been present at the Battle of Diagon Alley could not be hidden and Dumbledore hadn't tried. The hatred expressed by a small number of students- all of them on the watch list long before this- was far outweighed and outbalanced by the respect from the rest, and the deep worry of their professors. The four were given wide berth as they moved through Hogwarts, and more than one Gryffindor first year had turned to his or her prefects with problems of teasing or out-of-bounds magic to find the matter...satisfactorily...resolved.

For their part, the quad had barely noticed, wrapped in plans of helping Harry escape, and in Hermione's case, struggling to keep her mind whole and intact instead of splintered and raw.

Occasionally, a habit adopted since the beginning of the year, Hermione would go silent, and often it heralded a visit to the headmaster, but the three- Neville now replacing Harry- waited her out, patiently settled for the time when she would inform them of what caused her to go still as sculpture, her hands folded in her lap, right fingers often massaging her left wrist.

The mark had burned an hour ago, and Hermione had hesitated. Instead of going to Dumbledore, she sought his mind, her own pitching camp outside his walls, attentive to details he might give her, knowing that this was different. This might be the night they went.

Snatches of unprotected information had come to her if she woke before he did, when he was too tired or she was too close. She knew that whatever the ritual planned for Harry's death, it would happen on Halloween. Ten days from now. Any rescue attempt would necessarily take place between now and then. And Snape was there now.

Her fingers twitched, this time the right hand faintly warmed. And a moment's distraction...

Yes. It was tonight. And they had been kept deliberately in the dark.

'Right now,' she whispered, and shot to her feet, sprinting for her dormitory. The other three jumped. She had been deathly still for an hour, but they bobbed to their feet with her, Ginny giving chase where the boys could not.

'What's right now?' Ginny asked, searching the older girl's face as she entered Hermione's room. Since Harry's capture over a month before, Ginny had become aware, with a strange sense of kinship, that something weighed on Hermione, something different yet similar to the gut-twisting fear reverberating with pain and loss that woke Ginny in the middle of the night, something greater, stronger, more consuming- and that something was an emotion she battled against with all her might.

Hermione breathed deeply, steadying herself to return Ginny's concern. 'They are going to the-' she searched Snape's flickering wards- *Where am I going?* Flashes of images- a house on a hill, dilapidated stonework, ivy obscuring a once-grand doorway, grey stones, tombs-

'The Riddle House,' she vividly recalled Harry's description of the graveyard after their fourth year, when he had come out clutching Cedric's dead body.

'Harry?' Ginny followed instantly.

'Yes.'

'The rescue is tonight. How are we getting there? You haven't finished learning to Apparate,' Ginny's voice was rising, losing its prematurely adult tone and sounding more childish in her growing panic.

'Portkeys,' Hermione replied grimly. 'We always knew that they didn't want us going.' She produced a plain watch and a tin can.

Ginny shook her head in slow amazement. 'I could kiss you.'

'Wait until Harry's here safely,' Hermione responded, her expression apprehensive.

'But how did you know where to charm them to go?'

'They aren't charmed yet. One will take us there, the other will be touch-activated to bring us back here.' She concentrated on the watch, the cheery fireplace, enfolding armchairs, plush red carpet and steep, worn stone work of Gryffindor's common room carefully drawn in her mind's eye and transferred to the object. She felt a faint tingle, the face of the watch glowed for an instant, and she sighed as she laid it on the bed.

'That one will bring us back.'

'Sort of strange that you can Portkey in and out of Hogwarts when you can't Apparate,' Ginny remarked as Hermione lifted the tin can. The other girl opened one eye.

'You can't, really. The Portkey has to be made by a teacher, or in the Headmaster's office.'

'Is that what you've been doing there?' Ginny asked, her dark eyes growing wider.

Hermione opened her mouth to dissuade her, and stopped, closed her mouth and allowed, 'Yes.' Why correct her? The real reason for her visits to the headmaster was one a mere handful of professors and staff knew, and no students. If Ginny did not believe this-admittedly only partial- lie, she would have to believe another one.

No, Dumbledore's willingness to leave Hermione sitting in his office many of the nights that Snape had been called to Voldemort had given the girl ample time to read theory and practice the basic spellwork that adapted an ordinary object into one that would hold a Dislocator charm. And eventually, in no more than ten minutes while the headmaster had stepped out, she had transformed the two simple items she carried with her into Portkeys, ready to receive the spells that would specify them to locations and activations.

‘Get Ron upstairs to his room. Professor McGonagall will be coming soon to check that we are still here.’ Whether she would arrive on her own intuition or the headmaster’s orders, Hermione didn’t know. Her Head of House had given no intimation of knowing of her favorite student’s precarious feelings towards the former Potions master, but there were questions that McGonagall had never asked that Hermione thought she might if she were truly ignorant of the situation.

Ginny obeyed her. Since Harry’s capture the two girls had grown increasingly closer, knit together by what Ginny could not name, but it was characterized by tight mouths and a grim determination that neither Ron nor Neville possessed. And in the last month, when she awakened in the middle of the night for days in a row, shaking and sobbing with fear, stumbling up to Hermione’s four-poster bed, the girl had held her, stroking her hair, rubbing her back, murmuring that it would be all right, that Harry had survived through much, and that surely someone would have told them if he had come to harm.

When Hermione walked into the boys’ dormitory, she stopped short. ‘Neville-’

‘I just told Ginny all this,’ he said stiffly. His cane leaned abandoned against his bedpost, the limp almost eradicated, and the hard chips centered in his eyes told her that he would not be denied. But she had to try anyway.

‘Neville...’ she swallowed, ‘Neville, you almost died last time. And...’ she had never mentioned this before, but now suddenly it seemed the right time, ‘it was my suggestion you come with us to Diagon Alley. You cannot imagine, when I heard you were in Intensive Care-’

‘Hermione, thank you.’ He lifted the guilt crushing her with three words. ‘I wanted to be there. I *needed* to go. And I need to go now. Harry has endured more than all of us combined. And you are the only friends I’ve ever had that have believed that I could do better, who didn’t give up on me,’ his mouth twisted wryly, ‘no matter how many detentions Snape made me serve. How can I abandon him and you now just because of a little time in St. Mungo’s?’

Hermione stared at him. ‘That’s why I let him come,’ Ginny told her.

‘All right then,’ she conceded, and she knew when her vision blurred as she gave him a smile that tears threatened to spill out. She had the tin can in one hand. ‘This one will go when I touch it with my wand. But this,’ she extended the watch in the other hand, ‘is touch activated. So only use it in extreme danger- other than that, we’ll place it at the meeting point and all touch it at exactly the same time to come back safely. All clear?’

The other three nodded, and each stretched a hand to touch the tin can. As Hermione readied to transport them, Dean and Seamus tore into the room.

‘We’re going too.’

The four exchanged looks. They had all been to battle. Dean and Seamus were untried. But each had firmly put a finger on the can, looking at her expectantly.

‘It’s dangerous.’

‘We know.’

Hermione shrugged. It was, after all, a war. If Dean and Seamus felt ready to volunteer, she would not stop them.

‘No heroics,’ she warned. ‘We make a plan and follow it.’ The two nodded without hesitation.

The tip of her wand gently bumped the tin, making a soft *tong* and they jerked forward, the six of them spinning through the dark.

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Minerva stopped pacing. She threw a glance at the clock. Seven minutes since the summons. Severus had wanted Hermione Granger kept from the fighting and the rescue.

And given the power of the girl’s bond to him, she had to know by now what was happening, in spite of their many precautions.

Minerva threw open the doors leading to Dumbledore's rooms and sprinted along the corridors with a speed that seemed impossible for her nearly-seventy years. If she was lucky, though some inner voice warned her she would not be, she should reach Gryffindor Tower in time.

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*Five Weeks Previously...*

Hermione very nearly skived off Defense class, sitting and picking over her lunch, dreading what she knew was to come. His presence in the two days since she had healed him in the hospital seemed to stun her. She could not keep her eyes from following him, the burning heat of recalling his hands on her arms and the surety of knowing how much he wanted her.

But her thoughts of spending an afternoon by the lake instead of in his presence sparked a flash of anger and a direct order that he let her hear from his place at the head table. *Don't even think about it, Granger. There will be ten points from Gryffindor if you decide to go...missing.*

And so she went, keeping her head and hand down, performing flawlessly and without a sliver of recognition.

Snape was aware of her heightened attention, at meals and even in class, felt the draw of her gaze, her inability to look away, and he wished, not for the first time, that she had an increment of his self-discipline.

*Discipline that abandons me at the worst possible times*, he thought disparagingly. He could hear her running over their encounter in the ward endlessly, and the sweetness lacing her remembrance, her cherishing touch of his face, memorizing the hard planes and angles of a forbidding sculpture with her hands and not her eyes, was threatening to undo him as he too re-lived the event, wishing passionately that he could have stripped her of the flimsy hospital gown and felt every inch of her, from her long, strong legs to the curls that tumbled down her back.

But nothing could be gained by such thinking, despite the fullness, the complete joy and

total pain the bond brought him. Every other feeling he had ever endured was a shadow when faced with the consumptive intensity of his emotions revolving around Hermione. But his time grew ever shorter. Within the next nine months, he would kill the most powerful wizard in the world, and be forever sentenced to exile, and desire or no, she would loathe him and herself for his actions. More so because of it. He could not allow her to touch him again.

888

Only a week after the hospital incident, Hermione's arm burned again. This time there was no panic. Swiftly and methodically, she packed her bag, notes and books going in neatly. Cold and pale, she crossed the common room, exited the portrait and then sprinted to the Headmaster's office.

Panting the password, she was partway up the stairs when suddenly, the connection always closed to her opened wide, and she heard his voice as if from a great distance:

*Diagon Alley!* The desperation of the cry left no doubt as to what was going on there. For the second time in as many weeks, she entered a professor's office without knocking and announced without preamble, 'The Death Eaters are attacking Diagon Alley.'

There were no questions, no verifications, no delays. Dumbledore rose, turned to Fawkes and said, 'Minerva.' The bird vanished in flame. Dumbledore gazed down at the girl standing in front of him with over-bright eyes and all color leached from her cheeks. She did not deserve this baptism by fire.

But neither did the rest of them, and yet he was going to give the order.

When his wife arrived, he said quietly, 'Minerva, please bring Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and his sister Ginny to Diagon Alley. The Death Eaters have attacked. Miss Granger and I are going now.'



‘Albus, surely the Order-’ she gasped, eyes wide with horror. The look he turned on her made her well aware that he knew what he was asking.

‘I will alert them, but they will not get there soon enough. *This* is our army.’

‘*These* are our students!’ she blazed.

‘Yes, and in Diagon Alley, living and shopping right now, are in excess of a thousand witches and wizards, some of them new born, many with children of their own, few with dueling training, much less experience in fighting a guerilla war. We owe them our protection-now, not later!’ Whatever the effect of Dumbledore’s withered hand and the intangible impression of his waning magical ability, it seemed insignificant now, the aura of his power rising palpably as he made his decision. ‘I have no choice, Minerva. We cannot let them rampage the alley.’

She met his eyes for a moment, her own dark gaze as intense as the blue, then bowed her head in acquiescence, her disapproval muted by understanding despair. The Ministry had no standing army- only Magical Law Enforcement and the Auror Corps. Dumbledore’s Army and the Order of the Phoenix were indeed as close as they came to having a defense.

‘I will ward them all from harm in every way I can,’ the headmaster promised his wife quietly. He waved his hand, and a fistful of bottles floated to him. He placed them on the desk, save for one, which he handed to Hermione.

‘This will keep ballasts from falling on you,’ he said quietly. She drank it without hesitation. As the liquid, cold like ice, squeezed down her throat and into her stomach, she felt the rap on her head and the runny-egg feeling on her hair that marked a Disillusionment Charm. ‘And that should keep them from seeing you too easily. Are you ready, Miss Granger?’

She nodded, and then, ‘Bring Neville too, Professor. He wants to fight.’ Her face hardened, the cold lines of hatred incongruous on one so young. ‘Especially if Bellatrix Lestrange is there.’

The sorrow in the headmaster's eyes glittered as he nodded a hesitant 'yes'. He was placing his students and indeed, the hope of the wizarding world, in danger, deliberately driving them into hell's mouth, with only his wards to keep them from harm, and they themselves a barely-existent line of defense to save the lives of other innocents. But waiting would prove fatal for far too many, and these children had to learn quickly, had to finish the war on their own.

'Neville Longbottom, Mr. and Miss Weasley and Potter will join you momentarily,' McGonagall said shortly. 'I will also be there.' Her long strides covered the room in a few paces, the door closed, and Dumbledore was left watching the oak apprehensively. But he shook himself free of that instantly, and extended his arm as if escorting her to a fairy-tale ball.

'Take my arm, Miss Granger. This is Side-Along Apparition.' She grasped his arm in one hand, her hand clenching her wand in the other, disbelief at his decision to take them into violence, trusting his ability to care for them. They would be warded.

'Visualize Diagon Alley, Miss Granger. And when we arrive, in spite of the enchantments on you, duck.'

Hermione closed her eyes and readied herself, imagining with all her might the bookcases

lined with tomes in front of the great glass windows...

An immense pressure squashed her, pushing her breath out and making it impossible to draw another...

And she was in front of the bookstore, the great windows she had seen in her mind's eye shattered behind her with fires blazing to consume the bookshelves.

But Hermione had no eyes for the tragedy befalling the store behind her. Dumbledore vanished in an instant from her side, organizing the rout of the innocents as marble, brick and granite crashed like bombs in the street, sending shards of stone to bury themselves

in glass, merchandise and human flesh. The smell of smoke immediately clogged her mouth and nose, making her gag.

And in well organized units, she saw the sweeping black robes of the Death Eaters moving easily, killing and torturing... and laughing.

Fury flared in her so strongly it nearly drove her to recklessness, but she ducked first, recalling Dumbledore's orders and feeling a disbelieving flash of panic followed by a deep anger from her Defense professor.

Shaking her head to banish him from her thoughts- he was in the Alley and still alive, that was all she needed to know- she squatted behind a pile of grey-veined marble that could only have come from one of the missing columns on Gringotts Bank, pulled out her wand and aimed it at a black robe topped with a white mask.

'*Cervicus Reductum*,' she hissed. The Death Eater, his wand on a boy cowering next to a woman, shrieked in pain as the base of his spine cracked in half. Hermione smiled grimly.

She saw another Death Eater aiming for a red-head, undoubtedly one of the Weasleys, probably one of the twins, who was standing to Stun one. She lifted her wand and squinted through the growing haze.

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Ron and Harry Apparated in right behind her. 'Hermione!' Harry pulled her down as lances of spell light crashed over their heads, toppling another store front of stone. Hermione noted that under the pressures of battle, her Disillusionment Charm had already begun to fade, and her body seemed to be flickering in and out of easy visibility.

'We're here,' Ron announced unnecessarily. Hermione turned her back to him, pressing against him.

'Harry, on this side!' She pulled him into the triangle, their wands facing outward. The fleeing witches and wizards were scrambling toward the Leaky Cauldron and the exit of the alley. Some Muggles on the other side of the brick wall were in for nasty surprises. Hermione pointed to the end, where they could see the Death Eaters

amassing around the melee, adults and children dropping to their wands, easily picked off as the bottleneck kept the crowd from escaping.

'Right. We're going to that end, where everyone is trying to get out!' she shouted over the constant noise. 'But we have to move like this!' The boys nodded, eyes glittering, they started forward in a rotating triangle, wands issuing jets of light that felled the black shadows moving towards them.

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Snape could feel the girl appear in the alley, felt her fear, her anger and her hatred. The strong, dark emotion fed him, and he streamed it back to her, the only way to keep her moving quickly enough, lending her power to cast the spells she needed to use to stay alive.

He glanced down from the rooftop to watch her, scything through Death Eaters with Potter and Weasley, their triangle strategy an intelligent one, three shields merging together to protect them, the trio only partially visible- each Disillusioned, though the charm seemed to be failing. As a beam of yellow light narrowly missed Hermione, he sucked in his breath, his hands gripping the gutter.

As soon as he saw her home safely, he was going to have Dumbledore's head on a plate, vow or no vow.

888

*Right!* The instruction was so strong her arm seemed to jerk of its own accord, her mouth forming the words to a hex she wasn't entirely sure she knew. The Death Eater, closing in on a heedless Ron, flew backwards into a mostly-intact building, collapsing as his head struck the brick.

'Thanks, Hermione,' he murmured fervently. She nodded, distracted, his words and the noise of the battle both distant. Snape was here, watching her...

But the next blast, fiercer as more Death Eaters poured towards them from the entrance arch, penetrated their combined defense,

shattering the triad like so many shards of pottery. Hermione could taste blood in her mouth as she surged to her feet only to see Ron land ten feet away, the crack of his arm audible even through the laughter.

*Help us!* The thought escaped before she could censor it, and instead of a direct promise, confidence poured in. She could fight. She had the skill, the cunning, the need. She had to. She dropped into a crouch, wand extended towards the Death Eater striding in front of her. She Petrified him, and he toppled over in mid-stride like a figure abruptly turned to cardboard.

‘What is this?’ an amused voice spat into the morning air. A voice she recognized, one incongruously from both the Quidditch World Cup and the Department of Mysteries.

Lucius Malfoy. Her dark eyes blazed with a renewed hatred, Snape’s loathing compounding her intense dislike of the untouchable aristocrat.

‘One Miss Granger, I believe,’ he mocked. ‘Better clean up after your boyfriend, Mudblood. Blood stains, I hear.’ She did not follow the gesture of his wand to look at Ron, but kept her eyes on the grey ones behind the white mask.

He advanced on her, slow and lazy. Harry had ceased moving behind her, but she did not dare turn to him either, but only locked gazes with Malfoy, Snape’s voice suddenly in her mind. *When they attack, you will see it in the eyes first. The wand may feint, but never the face. Watch their features, for they will betray the true intent.*

She stumbled as her foot struck and bent on rubble, she bent to break her fall, her eyes flickering downwards for an instant—something glittered, flashing over her forearm, a gash opened under the splinter of glass and she gasped as her skin separated cleanly as a gutted fish, blood spewing forth to stain her hands. Her hair was in Malfoy’s grip, her head jerked backward so he filled her vision. He bent lower, and his mouth moved right by her ear, his voice rough and sneering.

‘Beg, bitch.’

'Will she survive?' Dumbledore lifted his eyes to the man standing over him as he crouched next to the body of Hermione Granger. She lay draped over smashed brick, her heart pumping blood out a severed artery to waterfall over the dusty red, staining it a darker hue.

'Headmaster...tell me,' Severus' voice was barely a whisper, it was a question of desperation. Dumbledore raised his head and saw what answer he must give, regardless of the truth. He needed Severus Snape- whole, well and undistracted. He could not afford to worry about this girl now. His long hands were already reaching for her, and Dumbledore could see the crackling white-blue of the bond snapping at his Potions Master's fingers, seething to jump the gap, to heal the badly wounded girl in front of them.

But he was too tired. He could not afford to heal her- especially if she was beyond it. The older man stilled the younger's hands, shaking his head. 'No, Severus, you cannot.'

He sighed, his own wand going to her chest, murmuring spells to heal the hole blasted in her left lung. The blue-white light seemed all the brighter in the darkened alley, and they watched as her tissue began to knit back together, splintered ribs becoming whole.

He nodded, exhaustion extinguishing the light in his blue eyes. 'She will.'

Severus straightened, withdrawing his hands and closed his eyes for just a moment, the tension relaxing around his mouth. Nothing would ease the burning in his chest, the bond that linked him to the girl on the ground flooding her pain into his heart and lungs. He nodded slowly, ignoring it, the Headmaster's reassurance assuaging a much greater fear. Then his eyes snapped open, and his customary cold brilliance echoed in them, the mind-numbing pain that Dumbledore had seen there disappeared, the tautness fleeing his shoulders. Without a second glance at Hermione, Severus strode away, growing fuzzy in the lingering smoke as he sought others.

Fires of all colors cast hell-shaded shadows on the remaining walls of Diagon Alley. Windows were shattered, gaping like open mouths of

jagged teeth. Marble from Gringotts pillars had hurtled from the sky like a deadly rain to shatter glass and break holes in wood, brick and granite walls.

*Diagon Alley...* by the time he knew, it had been too late to divert the attack. Voldemort had wanted it to be a complete surprise. No one had been told. He had called all of his Death Eaters together and Apparated them en masse to the alley. Severus had sent warning instantly, grateful for the first time for the strength and immediacy of the bond with his student.

But the Death Eaters were profoundly efficient. Even though they were as surprised as the witches and wizards they descended upon, they had instantly organized themselves by cell, coordinating under Avery and Lucius. All of Severus's assassins had Apparated onto roofs and fire escapes, picking their individual targets easily, blasting Muggle-borns, setting fire to stores and killing the Ministry members in the area. It had been all too easy to destroy the unprepared haven in a matter of minutes.

He stepped around blood, lifting bodies, checking pulses. Too many had none. He saw the Weasley clan gathered near the Leaky Cauldron. Mr. Weasley was supporting the dazed and bleeding owner of Flourish and Blotts, Molly was shaking visibly even from this distance, taking a head count as Bill, Charlie and Percy picked through the rubble. He could see the red hair of one of the twins, but he could see the tension in her craning neck: Molly was looking for Ron.

*Good luck to her,* he thought grimly. Weasley had been with Potter. And wherever Potter had been, that was where the fighting had been thickest. What had possessed the Headmaster to bring them into this? To deliberately risk the boy he had struggled for more than five years now to keep safe and out of the Dark Lord's hands? And he knew, looking at the devastation around him that Dumbledore had brought all the fighters he could, in the hopes of keeping innocents safe.

But the fighters included Hermione...

His robe caught, and he turned around. A small, slightly pudgy hand clutched the corner of his cloak.

‘Professor...’ Severus winced. Neville Longbottom. He gazed at the boy, closed his eyes at the sight of his mangled legs. Even with magic, Neville might be crippled for life.

‘Help me?’ Neville pleaded, a tongue darting nervously over dry lips.

Severus bent and removed the rubble from the boy’s body. A broken arm twisted so grotesquely the bone glistened white through shredded skin, and blood streamed freely from his mouth and a wound near his temple. Severus’ mouth dried instantly. Internal bleeding. If Neville didn’t get to St. Mungo’s now he would die.

He squatted, lifted the boy to Neville’s stanching screams of pain-

-and nearly dropped him. His arm seared angrily, and he could feel that the Dark Lord was wondering where he was. He gasped. He had to go-

‘Lupin!’ he barked.

Remus Lupin spun around in mid-stride. ‘Get Longbottom to St. Mungo’s. I...have business.’

Remus noticed the way he soothed his left arm when he took the bloodied bundle. ‘Good luck, Severus.’

Severus nodded curtly, unable to sneer. As he Disapparated, his mind returned to the image of Hermione’s body, broken open, her life’s blood feeding the cobblestones. For the first time in many years, he had to master his breathing, and the rage of savage thoughts tearing through his mind as he appeared in the graveyard behind the Riddle House. As his wits returned in their cool, unbreakable fashion, another, more familiar emotion emerged. Revenge smoldered inside him.

He took a deep breath and counted to ten. He could afford no unseemly displays, even while his blood seemed to boil from pain,



worry and fear. Personal fear. He swallowed the loathing that rose like vomit in his throat.

That had to wait for later. He ruthlessly turned off all the emotions that had roared to life inside him, feelings that would end his life shortly if Voldemort chanced on them while rooting through his thoughts.

In due time, he would discover and kill whoever had nearly murdered his Hermione.

## The Riddle House

Minerva McGonagall gasped the password to Gryffindor Tower, and raced in...too late. She took the stairs up to the boys' dormitories two at a time, ignoring the common room behind her, every head swiveled to watch their Head of House, many times older than the oldest of them, move with an alacrity most of them envied. She burst into the empty room, and cursed roundly. The aftermath of strong magic tingled in the air. Portkeys.

She growled under her breath as she whirled, the students peering in after her vanishing instantly as she strode from the room and started back down the stone staircase, her charges scattering before her like so many leaves in a storm. Hermione Granger was far too intelligent for her own good, and Merlin only knew how much the girl shared Severus' mind - and knowledge. He had promised to conceal from her all that he knew...but the strain of the bond was clear in his face and manner- always reserved, he looked permanently exhausted, his skin growing ever paler as unrelenting fatigue took its toll. And she had created at least one Portkey. In Hogwarts. *A student.*

Gazes that had lifted as she had sprinted in the door dropped as she reappeared in the common room, and entirely too many students were absorbed in upside-down books or found the ceilings and carpets had fascinating patterns previously unexplored. She cleared her throat as she crossed to one girl tucked up by the fire. Half a dozen students jumped, and heads bent in a further effort to make themselves invisible.

'Miss Granger, Mr. Longbottom and Mr. and Miss Weasley wouldn't happen to be here?' McGonagall asked Lavender Brown dryly. The girl lifted her eyes hesitantly, and shook her head.

'No, Professor.'

'I see. And where are they?'

'I don't know,' Lavender admitted, biting her lip.

'Hmmm. Miss Brown?'

‘Yes, Professor?’

‘When they return, send them to me.’ McGonagall did not wait for the girl’s nod, but ducked out of the portrait and tore through the halls back to her office. As the door slammed shut behind her, she threw Floo powder in the fire, stuck her head in the green flames and cried:

‘The Burrow!’ The world spun, and then Molly Weasley swan into view, a cup of tea in her hand. ‘Molly!’ McGonagall barked.

Mrs. Weasley jumped, tea spilling over the sides of the white china. ‘Minerva! Albus just alerted us. Alastor and the guard have gone-’

‘Yes, I know. If you can get through to them, Molly, tell them that Miss Granger, Longbottom and your youngest two children are in the house with them, and to exercise caution.’

Mrs. Weasley’s face paled, and she clenched her teeth. ‘They can’t act responsibly, can they? I told them specifically not to go. They could risk-!’

‘They all owe Harry their lives,’ McGonagall cut short her furious tirade. It was much the same that hers would be on their return. But to the irate mother, she felt the perverse need to explain their disobedience. ‘They have Gryffindor honor to an extreme, Molly, a trait we have carefully cultivated. We should not be surprised.’

Molly flared. ‘I’m not surprised! Just...’ her jaw worked furiously, and she sighed. ‘I will tell Alastor.’

‘Thank you.’ Minerva withdrew from the fire and stood, absently shaking ash from her grey hair as the lines of her face deepened with worry.

888

‘The new Minister of Magic will be traveling to Kent in two days,’ Snape was murmuring to a short, thin man in a corner of the graveyard, under a pine so massive the needles from the lower branches closed around them. ‘With him is his aide for the Foreign Office. Ensure that the aide does not return.’

The man's pale blue eyes did not flicker. 'Muggle or magical means, sir?'

'Muggle. No wand traces.'

The man gave him an indignant look. 'Do I ever leave any wand traces?'

Snape conceded with a nod. 'Undetectable.'

'Of course.' The assassin melted into the shadows cast by the gravestones as he slithered away. Snape sighed, and pulled a Time Turner out from beneath his robes. This one went not by hours, but by ten-minute increments. He had five minutes before Dumbledore would arrive to rescue the boy.

Having put the final touches on his alibi, Snape flipped the tiny hourglass three times.

888

They emerged at the base of a hill in darkness. Up the hill, through the bars of a wrought-iron fence, stood a dilapidated mansion. Hermione glanced around her, surveying her small force. All five had come with her, and were staring at the darkened house. Memories of the disaster in Diagon Alley instantly dampened her exultation at successfully creating Portkeys. Chills traveled down her spine. After that debacle, how could she be so arrogant as to believe they would carry this off?

Dropping into the middle of the battle, her memories were muddy and confused. It had been all curses and ducking, fire, smoke and blood until a well-aimed piece of glass had sliced into her wand arm, crippling her. After that there had been that awful, taunting voice, Lucius Malfoy's voice...then a neck wound... followed by Saint Mungo's, where she had awakened thirty-six hours later.

'Where are we?' Neville murmured, interrupting her stream of remembrances.

‘Where Harry is. The Dark Lord’s headquarters,’ she replied, throat catching. She who had always cautioned Harry, who had restrained him at every turn, had neatly brought them to the yawning maw of the serpent’s den. The others with her stared at her, their eyes huge, reflecting fear in the light of the streetlamp. She took a deep breath, and reached out to touch Neville’s arm. Of all of them, the battle in the alley had treated him by far the worst. His willingness- *eagerness*- to come had shocked her. Neville had served his term, and paid his undeservedly high price.

‘It will be like the last time...only there are fewer of us now,’ she told him quietly. ‘The Portkey will take you straight back to the school if you wish.’

Neville eyed the house, glanced at the Portkey they had dropped next to a bush to hide it, and shook his head. ‘No. I’m staying. Harry...Harry would do the same for any of us. And besides,’ he added bravely with a lopsided smile, ‘this time, we have the advantage of surprise.’

‘You-Know-Who’s house.’ Ron glowered at the ivy-covered walls on the hill. ‘Some Lord. Doesn’t look like much to me.’

The smiles and snorts of nervous laughter gave the redhead the reaction he was looking for. His crooked half-smile quirked at the edge of his mouth as he looked at Hermione. ‘Do we charge?’

She grinned without mirth. ‘No. We creep.’

888

Snape slipped behind the group of Death Eaters. His lord was calling him forward, he was approaching...he slid into the house sideways, skipping the creaking floorboard on the threshold of the back door.

He hurried up the stairs as quickly as he dared, listening for himself entering the house.

He heard his voice, and his master’s as they strolled through the ground level. He shook his head to clear the bizarre double-sense

feeling that always came from turning time and seeing himself. Distractions could prove fatal.

He placed his feet carefully, his boots silent, the floor soft shifts squeaking very quietly. Fortunately, the whole house often shifted with the same sighs, and he knew his lord wasn't going to notice. He was down there with him now.

Barely breathing, he edged up to the locked door and checked his watch. Twenty minutes to figure out how to break in and get the boy out before Dumbledore and his force crashed the gate.

888

The students crept up the hill, grass rustling and twigs snapping under feet tiptoeing painfully in a bid for silence. 'Looks deserted to me,' Dean whispered hopefully.

'Of course,' Hermione responded quietly. 'If it were visible to everyone, someone would notice. Clearly, we are meant to find this house unoccupied.'

Ginny's fist tightened on her wand. 'What's the plan?'

'To get in and find Harry,' Hermione answered. 'And to help rescue him.'

'Dumbledore cannot break the wards. What makes you think we can?' Neville puffed. The house drew nearer.

'We aren't here to break the wards. Professor Snape will do that. We're here to give him the time to do it.'

888

Snape reached for the door handle. It glowed hot, his skin protesting long before he had even touched the brass...he grasped the metal and the charm cooled, keyed to his touch. Wincing, he withdrew his hand. The wards would undoubtedly boil the boy's blood if he were thrust through them. Un-warding it would be then...

As he closed his eyes and breathed in preparation for the first spell, he felt *her*. Far too strong to be in the safety of Hogwarts. Close at hand. And her mind painted a shadowy house perched at the top of the hill, confirming his fear. She was here.

Spells left his head as the breath vanished from his lungs, fear knotting furiously in his stomach. She was *here*. In spite of everything...the Weasley brats had come...and she with them.

*Anger*. He recognized the flare under the terror, and fanned it into flame. He could still save Potter if he were angry. Fear caused stupidity. Rage could be controlled, saved, wielded. He bent his head to his task, eyes blazing as he yanked his wand out and pointed it at the door.

888

Mrs. Weasley materialized in a grouping of hedges on the outskirts of the property. Not twenty feet away, she could make out the shadowed silhouettes of her compatriots in the Order. She hurried towards them. 'Alastor!'

Moody jumped, spinning, wand whistling through the air to stop at her heart. He opened his mouth for the curse, and blinked at the completely unfazed woman before him. 'Molly Weasley! How did you get here?' She extended a teacup by way of explanation.

'Portkey. Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Neville are here.'

Moody's eyes widened, his magical blue eye going haywire. 'They what?' he growled.

'Minerva just contacted me. They are apparently either on their way or somewhere near the house.'

Jaw locked furiously, he glowered at her. 'Don't look at me like that, Alastor! I certainly didn't want them here.'

He finally forced gruffly, 'We'll keep an eye out for 'em, don't worry. Get out of here, Molly. This is going to be ugly very shortly.'

Mrs. Weasley nodded and retreated down the hill to where she could Apparate out.

‘Hear that?’ Moody asked his guard.

‘Yep,’ Tonks replied grimly as the rest of the squad clenched their teeth in mute dread and resignation. ‘Hogwarts students on the grounds, exercise caution.’

888

They had reached the front door. It was locked, and no amount of ‘*Alohomora!*’ could get it open.

‘Well, that worked well,’ Ron muttered. ‘What now?’

‘Around the house. We can get in the back.’

‘Something tells me that this could be really unpleasant,’ Ginny said as they followed Hermione through the tangled ivy to the back of the house.

888

Snape tapped his wand a third time and dragged it around the brass knob counter-clockwise, ignoring the heat threatening to blister his hands, gradually dismantling the spells. The wards were person-specific, and he was one of the people they were tied too, permitting him to even try to pull them down without the skin flaying from his bones. Getting past them into the room with Potter was easy enough. But getting Potter out with the wards still in place had proven impossible.

An image flashed clearly in his mind, one he had not gotten during his conversation with the Dark Lord... *She was creeping towards the back, ivy leaves brushing her arms, wand extended, bravery and desperation replacing fear with five Gryffindors at her back...*

Fear thrust its cold fingers into his gut once more. *No!*

888



Hermione gasped, fingers convulsing around ivy-covered stone as a swoop of fear lodged in her abdomen.

‘What is it?’ Ginny was immediately next to her, the rest of the group stopping in concern, crouched low, wands raised.

‘Nothing,’ Hermione said. The strong *No!* that had echoed in her mind rattled through her body. It had been so powerful... Snape’s voice echoed so fully...he must have meant her to hear it. He was afraid. For her. She shook her head to clear it, tangling her locks on bushes. She could not be frightened, she could not back away, her friends trusted her to pull them through it...to have a plan. She always had a plan.

So her voice was steady when she said, ‘Let’s keep going.’

888

The fool girl was pressing onward. She would come on the graveyard shortly. A graveyard full of Death Eaters. She, and whomever she was leading, was walking straight into a trap. He checked the clock. Fifteen minutes. If they did walk into it, the trap would not be sprung for at least another ten minutes. He had a little time.

888

Dumbledore was settled on the roof of the house, observing the ritual going on beneath him, the greeting and speaking to Death Eaters, the cool way the Dark Lord handled both praise and torture. It was impossible not to admire the discipline and the organization, the rigid rank and obvious hierarchy that dominated the seemingly-random pattern of stances below. So different than the boisterous Order meetings where all offered opinions and none pulled rank.

Movement in the corner of his eye caught his attention. He peered closer, felt his stomach drop, but no surprise. Harry Potter was in the house, and come hell or high water, his three best friends would be here. And they had proven years ago that no teacher could hope to contain them, and now that Hermione was bonded to Severus... It was dark-haired Neville, still slower than the rest because of his leg, and Dean Thomas and Seamus Finnigan that brought the stab of

unexpected worry. But he could not move. This was his only chance to retrieve the hope of the wizarding world.

His six students were crawling along the side of the house very slowly, in fits and starts. Given their rate of travel, Dumbledore gave them twelve minutes before they ran into the Death Eaters.

There were only nine minutes before Snape would have Harry out. Perhaps they could be spared disaster.

888

Snape worked feverishly, a new goal springing to life. He had asked Minerva to keep them safe. Unsurprisingly, they had managed to get around her. But the idea of Hermione standing against all the Death Eaters in the yard chilled his blood, and he abandoned their game, their pretense of unyielding hatred and aloof ignorance.

*Wait. Wait,* he ordered her as he removed the Earth Ward. *Hold your position. Wait until I am done, wait until I can get you out of here.*

888

*Wait,* came the directive from within the house.

*Where are you?* Hermione sent her thoughts outward. Where Snape was, Harry would be.

The image of a dark corridor, up a set of damp and rotting stairs with worn and moth-eaten carpet, popped into her head. *Wait for me,* the command came again. *Do nothing.*

'He's inside the house,' she said.

'Who's inside the house?' Neville asked.

*Snape.* 'Harry.'

'Isn't that where we expected him to be?' Ron asked.

The picture of a graveyard, masked and cloaked figures swarming like bees in their hive, solidified in her mind, telling her their odds. Another gift from Snape. Hermione's stomach turned to lead.

'One place, yes. But he might have been in the cemetery.'

'What cemetery?' Dean asked.

'The one in front of us.'

'We have to get into the house another way, then,' Ron murmured.

'Wait a minute, wait a minute.' Ginny took a deep breath, as if she were bracing herself to say something she did not want to say and could not believe she was actually saying.

'We're here to provide a distraction. Aren't we here to keep the adult rescuers from being noticed? Don't we need to go where Harry *isn't*? That is the plan, right?'

They glanced at one another. 'Right,' Hermione admitted. 'But...there are dozens of Death Eater's in that yard. What kind of a decoy did you have in mind?'

888

Fire. The final and most difficult of the wards to dismantle. Snape checked his watch almost compulsively. Three minutes. From Granger's swirling thoughts, he knew they had stopped, not yet in danger, but not retreating either. Muddled confusion merged with his thoughts, and he thrust her away. A few more minutes...he had to get Potter out.

Wand against the door, he began stripping the oak of the last spell that would prevent Potter from crossing the threshold. He took a deep breath. Once the spell was gone, the Dark Lord would be alerted. It was all in the timing. If the Headmaster didn't have Potter out in under thirty seconds after the alarm sounded, the Dark Lord would find them.

888

*Three minutes.* 'Three minutes,' Hermione mumbled.

'What'd you say?' Ron asked.

'Three minutes. We should attack the graveyard in three minutes.'

'That's mad,' Neville marveled. But his face betrayed his intent- the excitement that only revenge can ignite glittering in his face.

'Yes.'

'We can't Portkey out, Snape said.'

'And the Portkey is at the bottom of the hill anyway,' Seamus volunteered.

'And plenty of shield spells have been added to ensure there can be no repeat performance of Harry's escape,' Hermione sighed. 'We're not going to charge them, we're going to do it guerilla style. The ivy hides us well, so if we sneak around this side and the end of graveyard, we can fire off a few key spells. What they really need is for all the Death Eaters to be distracted for two minutes, no more.'

'How do you know that?' Seamus asked.

'Dumbledore said it had to be quick in the meeting. "Meticulous timing is required" is the exact phrase he used. In three minutes, Harry should be rescued and gone.'

'How do you know three minutes?'

*Because Snape is the one doing the timing.* 'It's been twenty-seven minutes since Dumbledore was contacted.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'How?' Ginny asked.

'I timed it,' Hermione replied coolly. 'How I know is not important. *That* I know is what matters. When we get around them, Stun them first.'

We only get one, maybe two, shots, and there are only six of us.' As she pinned each with a grim look, they nodded in agreement.

'Should we get in position?'

'Yes.'

'What's the signal?' Ron checked.

'Look for...'

*Make it a sound*, the rough instruction shouldered its way to the front.

Without missing a beat, she changed her mind. 'Listen for...a falcon's shriek. I will

make the sound with my wand. When you hear it a second time, pull back,' Hermione told him. They hunkered against the ivy-streaked stone as they crept forward. *Professor...tell me when...*

888

*Granger. No...* the fire element was nearly gone, he had forty-five seconds...

Dumbledore's long silver hair flared out behind him, seeming to light the hallway on it's own as the Headmaster scrambled through a window with an agility that belied his age. He strode towards his Defense professor, feet seeming to glide over the worn and shredded carpet and wooden floor.

'Are you ready?' he whispered hoarsely.

Snape muttered the last of the spells, the lock sprang free, and he dashed into the room.

The shriek of a falcon meet the screaming of the alarm as Snape threw Harry Potter bodily from the room into the Headmaster's waiting hands and sprinted down the stairs.

888

Voldemort's head jerked up. Many of the Death Eaters were just beginning to leave. But the cries of the broken seals sparked a stream of curses that stopped all those who had not Disapparated in their tracks.

Not that it mattered. Red light shot through the graveyard from six directions, illuminating the otherwise dark night and dropping five of the Death Eaters where they stood. '*Stupefy!*' came the cry again. Another two down, and others hastily put up shields.

'My lord, we're under attack!' hissed Lucius Malfoy.

'Well spotted,' Voldemort replied acidly. He held very still for a few seconds. No further spells seared out of the dark. 'But it seems there aren't very many of them. They are not out in the open, nor are they advancing. In fact...'

Snape hurtled to his side from the back door. 'My Lord! The alarms...the boy is gone!'

'You checked the room?!'

'Yes.' He ducked as a curse hurtled over his head. 'Are we under attack as well as sabotage?'

'So it would appear.'

'I fear, my Lord, that the attack is merely a distraction. It is too well-timed for anything else. We have a traitor, and it is the boy that matters.'

'I agree,' Voldemort glanced at the house, then nodded to Snape. 'Send half the assassins with me upstairs to find the boy. You and Lucius can stay here and round up these few. They are a decoy, not the full mount of the Order or the Aurors, and they should clean up easily.'

Snape felt his stomach twist. Granger. The Dark Lord had a knack for assigning the servants who would struggle the most to the task. He had long ago stopped believing that this was a coincidence. The Dark Lord had some reason not to trust him upstairs...or else knew that it

would be more difficult to complete this task and as usual, had put the metal into the fire to see how it would react.

888

Harry stumbled along beside Dumbledore, coughing, his weight leaning into the older man as they hurried along the hallway in the dark. Silence was now impossible, and their creaking betrayed them in their rush to the window at the end of the hall.

The boy had to get out of the house before they were stopped... Dumbledore felt the Dark Lord arrive at the top of the stairs in the corridor behind them, and he straightened his shoulders, letting Harry slip to his knees next to him. The window was barely four feet away-

*'Protego!'* The shield spell rebounded the curse the Dark Lord fired, the magic enveloping the boy next to him.

*'Let him go, Dumbledore. You cannot hope to get both of you out of here,'* Voldemort's voice rang confidently. *'I will let your miserable hide live if you leave the boy.'*

*Alastor! Alastor, I need you! It is time!*

888

*Get out of here!* The voice doubled inside her mind painfully, as if someone had shouted it directly in her ear. There was no mistaking the fear in his voice, or the multiple Death Eaters now moving purposefully towards her scattered force, their shields flickering as the spells from Dumbledore's Army bounced off and flew back towards their owners.

Her wand emitted the falcon's shriek a second time, telling them all to get out. She watched Neville begin to crawl backwards into the bushes, obscured by the leaves...

There went Ginny, around the back of the tree. They would work on getting back to the Portkey...

She craned as she scrambled backwards over the fallen leaves, trying for both stealth and speed as she sought Seamus, Dean and Ron amongst the shadows.

'Miss Granger.' Her blood froze. That voice...

Lucius Malfoy's voice. And she was suddenly standing in Diagon Alley again, flesh ripped and pouring blood from her wand arm.

*Black robes, but grey eyes glittered from behind the mask, and a strand of blond hair, dotted with blood gave away the identity of her attacker. Her curls in his fist, that voice in her ear, 'Beg, bitch...'*

888

'Right. Into the house! Second level!' Moody roared as bright green light flashed in the grimy windows nearest them.

'I'm on it!' Tonks leapt astride her broom and flew at the window closest to them on the second level. Hands forward, body low on the broom, she rocketed forward- thrusting through the window in a blaze of glass that shattered into the oncoming Death Eaters.

Dumbledore pointed at Harry with his mangled free hand, his wand still out to maintain the shield. Tonks followed his hand to the boy, face and hair matted with blood, arms and legs more bruised than clear as he lay keeled over on the floor.

'Get him out of here!'

888

'Leave her!' hissed another behind Malfoy, breaking Hermione out of her past disaster and into the present one. Severus Snape strode forward, gazing at the girl trapped on the ground, the wand of the blond aristocrat he had so recently helped escape from Azkaban pointed directly between her eyes.

Hermione's breath caught in her throat. Before her stood a man she did not know. The cold, merciless black of his eyes glittered through the bone white mask as she had seen only once before. But this was



no fluke, no exhaustion or surprise forming the mask. There was none of the softness she had seen there before, none of the gentleness. This was the Death Eater, literally the man behind the mask.

‘Do you want to do the honor of killing her yourself?’ Lucius’ voice was mocking, but

careful not to reveal a name. ‘I fear you will find I have the prior claim. I nearly killed the Mudblood bitch in Diagon Alley. I was almost certain I had succeeded.’

‘Don’t be a fool,’ Snape spat. ‘There are no claims- except to whether she lives or dies. The executioner is irrelevant.’

‘Then allow me to properly do the job.’

‘The Dark Lord is not forgiving of mistakes. Neither am I. And killing her could prove a very...expensive...mistake.’

She reached for his mind, the one that had guided her in battle, to find it closed as usual. There was nothing for her to hear, to glean. She was three feet away from him, and the look in his eyes made her far more distant than she had been for months. She swallowed, closed her eyes and bowed her head.

And she made her decision. She would not die on her knees, whether the blast came from Malfoy or the professor who’s heart twined with hers nearer than her life’s vein. Her eyes snapped open and she stood to look him straight in the eye. Malfoy’s wand followed her form up, and she ignored it, her eyes trained on the dark man as the two Death Eaters remained silent, a battle of wills unfinished, the prize one that had to be earned, not just taken.

And a soft thought, almost a whisper, ghosted into her mind, quiet and resigned and proud. *I love you.*

*I love you.*

Hermione stood looking into the eyes of a man she knew but did not recognize, his words wiping clean her mind, the numbing pronouncement striking equal blows of irrational, leaping hope and ice-sharp certainty. *I love you.* She was going to die. Right here and right now. It did not occur to her to wonder if he meant it, she could feel the truth of the words, even as his gaze belied them...the acadamian in his lab, the brutally chilling man in front of her eyes-

-she could not think of it now! Perhaps all was not lost...

The seconds stretched between them, incalculable, brown and black gazes once again testing the mettle of the other. Her eyes never moved. Lucius Malfoy may as well not have been there for all she acknowledged him.

*Gryffindor bravery.* Hermione was staring straight into his face without flinching, her wand arm stiff, her white-knuckled hand betraying her readiness to strike. The tumult of fear and the new emotion, the irrepressible surge of happiness and adrenaline he could feel from her, refused to cross her features. She was as brave as Potter had ever been and more courageous than many a witch or wizard who had perished beneath his wand.

*I can't,* Snape realized bleakly, his wand pointed steadily, but his vocal cords frozen, and soundless incantation only drew a blank from his mind. *I cannot even pretend...I cannot act to protect her by being willing to kill her.*

*I must. If Lucius pushes...I cannot sacrifice the war for one girl. Even this one.*

'Concede, man,' Lucius growled. 'This score is mine to settle.'

Snape glided forward, his wand stilled by pressing it to her skin, transfixed between her eyes, her fear feeding his self-control. Hermione could feel the wood humming on her forehead with the effort it took him to hold it there, but he smiled coldly, letting the curl of his lips bleed into his voice, imagining what he was going to do with Lucius Malfoy when he got the chance. He finally *knew* who had

hurt her in the Alley. He had always suspected...and revenge was almost a taste in his mouth. But that he had to save for later.

‘She is one of the brat’s best friends. Perhaps she is more valuable left alive.’

Lucius shook his head, opened his mouth to object, and stopped. And chuckled. A more eerie sound, Hermione was sure she’d never heard. ‘True enough. You always think in such long terms. Let her live then. Augustus could do with a pretty young thing to...extract...information from.’

*No! Not Rookwood!* Snape thought violently. Hermione twitched slightly before him, the force of his fear rocking through her physically, his guards locking away his specific thoughts while his wand affixed to her forehead betrayed the feelings at their base.

But all his mouth replied was: ‘Indeed. Perhaps we can determine from her who the next targets should be. Whether the Weasley boy or perhaps,’ the wandpoint twisted on her forehead like a drill, ‘the Weasley girl?’ Lucius sniggered, eyes feral behind the mask.

*How dare you!* Hermione’s mental cry of fury, superceding for just a moment both fear and pleasure, seared him. *Leave Ginny and Ron alone!*

Gryffindors. No subtlety. No understanding. No sense of trade or prioritizing. No wonder Gryffindors never survived among the Death Eaters. The whole damn lot were too honest.

‘You can certainly be depended on to think of the vilest, most excruciating things,’ Lucius chortled low in his throat. ‘Mudbloods and children don’t appeal to me, but Gus, well...Augustus thinks a female is a female and this one is no poor specimen. Come girl.’ Lucius seized her wrist. His manicured hands hid his strength, and she felt the bones pinch, yelping involuntarily as they crushed together.

*Now!* Snape yanked his wand from her forehead, Hermione’s wand flicked up as she Stunned Lucius, and he toppled over, triumph still stamped on his white face, blond hair sloshing in the mud. The rest of

the Death Eaters froze for barely an instant as she spun and started to run-

-and in a blaze, curses flew after her, spells fusing together in deadly rainbows as Snape added his own to the fray, trying to divert them and buy her time-

War cries preceded the hexes that suddenly hurtled on the Death Eaters from all sides. The Order's guard had arrived at the scene. Snape sighed in relief behind his mask. He recognized Moody's gruff voice behind the spell that felled a Death Eater right next to him. A granite headstone a few feet away exploded into tiny shrapnel that lodged itself in the bodies of those around him, groans rising as the shards embedded in sensitive skin.

His sudden flare of relief died when he saw Bellatrix Lestrange. She was out in front, unstoppable in her private world of hatred, her face disfigured by a mad smile, wand extended. There was no way for her to miss, and she was going for murder, no matter that the girl was scarce seventeen... Snape threw himself forward, the memory of Hermione's body pouring blood over the bricks of Diagon Alley fueling his strides. *One...two...* Bella's eyes glittered in the anticipation of the glory given her after she killed one of Harry Potter's best friends...he slammed into her, sending her arm askew, the brilliant purple light flaring to miss Hermione by inches.

As they tumbled to the ground they tangled with others, the Death Eaters fleeing the Order and chasing Hermione stumbling and falling with them, a knot of confusion in the middle of the yard.

'Where did she go! Get off me! Get off me!' Bellatrix was screaming in rage underneath him. With a snarl of his own, Snape thrust his wand and his fingers into ribs, thighs and necks, causing the owners of these parts to howl and scramble away.

'Did she escape?' The shout rose from several mouths.

'I doubt it,' Snape replied dryly. Bellatrix's misfired spell had set the grass alight, barring Hermione's way out. Snape could see her running, illuminated by the eerie purple flame roaring over the lawn.

‘She’s trapped!’ Bellatrix exulted, she started after the girl and Snape tore after her, easily overtaking his old friend’s wife as she rounded the gardens, hedges and ivy catching fire as the blaze roared to life.

‘Hurry!’ he bellowed to the Death Eaters behind him. He took the corner after Hermione, pausing to say, in a deeper voice more reminiscent of Kingsley Shacklebolt’s than his own, *‘Impedimentia!’*, toppling the two Death Eaters right on his heels. The night was so dark they would not be able to identify him, and the evidence would be easy enough to erase from his wand.

All that mattered now was the running, his feet in the grass, the pulsing need to get her out. She was so close to him, so very, very near, and her fear was as palpable as her ragged heartbeat, the roar of his blood and hers filling his ears.

The wall of fire continued on his left as suddenly he was passing the main doors into the decrepit mansion, and they flew open, revealing the Dark Lord, a snarl on his features.

‘Who set this?’ he snapped as Snape sprinted past him.

‘Bellatrix,’ the Death Eater shouted as he raced past. ‘She was trying to stop one of Potter’s friends from escaping. I’m after her now.’

‘Bait! The boy is gone. Get her!’

‘My lord!’ Snape continued his pounding through the night. *Someone stop me*, he thought desperately as his feet beat the ground. As he came around the third side of the house, he saw her again, trying as mightily as she could to outrace the fire. But every time she swerved to get out, the flame blocked her as if it had a mind of its own. With each of her attempts to get around the fire, he felt the heat on his own arms, the fine dark hairs stinging painfully.

His long legs covered more ground, and he was far more used to running than she was. His strides ate the distance between them, boots thudding on the grass as he drew closer. Hermione risked a glance behind her. Snape was coming. And he was panicked, his fear for her more solid now than when his wand had drilled into her forehead, and the jumbled images their link, his discipline abandoned

as he pursued her.... She pulled fresh speed from her aching legs and her stitch-laced lungs, unsure if she could face him, two opposing images at war in her mind. The man behind the mask. The coldness in his eyes. The worry, the fear, the need to help her without betraying himself...

*I love you.*

888

Dumbledore sighed in relief. The Dark Lord's arrival had been unfortunate, if not unexpected. But Tonks had removed Harry on the broom, and the rest of the Order had poured into the house through the broken glass and Stunned most of the Death Eaters instantly.

The whole operation had taken no more than thirty seconds, and then they were out again. 'Apparate home, Dumbledore!' Moody had growled as the Order rushed to help the students trapped in a now-pitched battle on the grounds.

In no mood or condition to argue, Dumbledore had Disapparated to the Burrow, grateful for the knowledge and the power that allowed him around Voldemort's wards, even with crippled abilities.

Now Tonks was here, with a scarred and battered Harry, whom she had Apparated with as soon as she was beyond the spells around the house.

'Is he all right?' Molly Weasley was bustling over, hot cloths at the ready.

Bruising on his cheeks, his ribs and neck promised at least some abuse, and all three adults winced at the idea of lifting his shirt, of discovering further evidence in cracked and broken ribs, in scraps and cuts and- if they were lucky- lashes. If they were lucky. If they were not, he might bear testament to torture with knives or acids, Muggle techniques that the Dark Lord favored, and internal bleeding, a broken or torqued spine...

'We're not making this any better by standing here waiting for it,' Tonks whispered hoarsely, her hand on his t-shirt collar.

‘You’re right.’ Dumbledore whispered, his wand already at some of the livid marks on his face. ‘Strip him, Nymphadora.’

888

Snape closed the last few feet, shoving his wand in his pocket as he reached for Hermione-

-his intention crystallizing in her thoughts, she extended her hand backwards, inviting him to catch it, the cries of the Death Eaters behind them spurring them forwards, his stride lengthened further, the small hand in front of him like a desperate flag, he caught it-

-as in the hospital wing, the touch of flesh-on-flesh brought the desire crashing below waves of terror into check, soothing the heat of his blood- and even smoothing the rough edges of his fear, and hers.

Hermione felt the fingers close around her own, and instantly had her answer. She loved him. Death Eater or no, the touch alone calmed her, made it possible to think, another course of action had to be taken than running. She could not outrun the fire-

*Trust me*, he commanded. The sound of his mental voice was tangible, their physical contact a conductor far more attuned than the finest copper wire. Their feet struck the dirt in unison now as he ran alongside her, behind them the Death Eaters were growing louder-

-still running, steps pounding together in rhythm, he swung his other arm around her, lifting her bodily off the ground and into his arms.

Peace. Gone was the choking smoke and searing heat, the screams and triumphs of battle, the smell of scorched earth. There was only blood, their heartbeats tolling together, bodies melded to each other, folding in their robes to fit together, the way her head and legs tucked just so to him...

Snape yanked himself from his brief daydream. This peace was an illusion. The fire, real and rapidly spreading, advanced across the lawn before them, ringing them in, and behind, the telltale noise of his compatriots threatened.

Without breaking stride, he glanced at the flames, made his decision and shut his eyes. Wrapping his cloak around them, he tucked his body around her and rolled through the line of fire, his black cloak and lithe body smothering and protecting Hermione from the blazing heat.

He reeled into standing position, Hermione's arms around his neck on the other side of the fire, purple flames dying on the edges of his robes.

'Hermione!' Her pack of Gryffindors was tearing up the hill, Ron in the lead with Neville Longbottom and Ginny Weasley hard on his heels, and behind them the gasping figures of two others, hurrying towards him.

Ron's mouth was dry with dread and hate. He could see Hermione silhouetted against the flame, vivid in the Death Eater's grasp. His wand was out, and he could see his sister out of the corner of her eye, wood extended, an equally violent, wild fear in her eyes.

Hermione's feet hit the ground, she stumbled, the comfort vanished and she found herself on the outside of the flame, struggling for purchase, unsure what had happened, how she was here-

'Stun me,' a voice grated in her ear. 'Do it, you stupid girl!'

It was a voice she obeyed without hesitation or question. Her wand arm came up in one liquid motion as her mouth formed the words, the light spewing forward even as she completed spinning, striking at point blank range and joined by three other jets of red.

*'Stupefy!'*

888

'We should have unmasked him.' Ron grumbled as they all arrived at the school in one piece, attached to their Portkey, standing in the middle of the boy's dormitory. They glanced at each other. Dean and Seamus shook, and Neville squeezed both shoulders, went to his trunk and retrieved six butterbeers.



‘Drink,’ he handed them around. ‘It’s not exactly Ogden’s, I know, but it helps a little.’

The permanent warmth of the drink calmed their nerves as they quickly checked each other over. Both Ron and Ginny reached to wipe dirt, leaves and grass off Hermione, and Ron’s hand gently brushed her hair aside to reveal a large and bloody scratch running across her forehead.

‘It doesn’t hurt too much,’ she told him, shying away from his touch.

‘We should get Madam Pomfrey to see to it anyway,’ Ginny said.

Hermione shrugged. She was covered in soot from the fire and bruises from the roll, most of them likely inflicted by Snape’s elbows rather than the ground. Snape. She sent her mind out- but so far from him, and in the aftermath of the battle, he was guarded, and she caught no more than a shade of him.

But she was glad to note that the others had been luckier than she, and none bore more than scratches from thorns and the fading sensations of exhilaration born of fear and adrenaline.

‘How are you?’ she asked Dean gently.

Dean nodded, lifted his butterbeer in a hand that was trembling less, and smiled shakily. ‘Fine. I’m fine.’

‘Is that what it’s always like?’ Seamus asked in a hoarse voice, his eyes glittering with fear, exultation and admiration.

She shook her head, her throat thick. ‘No. When we went after the Philosopher’s Stone our first year, it was easier. And the Department of Mysteries and Diagon Alley were much worse.’

Seamus and Dean’s expressions were wide, and it was easy to read the awe written there. She hastily rushed to disabuse them- there were enough children embroiled in this war without adding more, and they had been extraordinarily fortunate to escape with no more than the rush left over from fear and action.

'We were lucky,' she continued in a whisper. 'We did not deserve to get away with what we just did.' The strange, almost strangled, quality of her voice doused the thrill of their adventure, and it was a solemn group that considered their butterbeer for long moments, taking pulls and swallowing, the constriction expelling the physical aftereffects, the high spiraling towards normalcy once more.

'Did they succeed?' Ginny asked suddenly, her dark eyes sharpening with a sick fear.

'Yes,' Hermione instantly replied. Snape had given Harry to Dumbledore. She had felt his hands touching Harry's skin almost as surely as if they were her own, seizing his arms, thrusting him at the headmaster. Her hands twitched with the memory of an action not her own.

'How do you know?' Ron asked immediately.

Hermione sighed. 'Because the Death Eater we Stunned was Professor Snape. He told me.'

'*Snape?!'* Ron shot to his feet, butterbeer going all over the comforter that he had just vacated. 'That was Snape attacking you?'

'Not attacking. Defending,' Ginny followed Hermione's expression.

'He...saved me- he rolled me through the fire,' she explained as briefly as she could, her eyes fixed on the floor.

Neville gasped, hand flying to his mouth as his freckles popped against suddenly-white skin. 'We Stunned him,' he stammered.

'He wanted us to.' Hermione's hand closed around his arm. 'We had to, to preserve his cover. He won't care. We got out. Harry got out. That's all-' Hermione stopped, paling. For in front of her the dormitory door had swung open, and there stood Professor McGonagall, white-faced, thin-lipped, and furious.

'Er...hello, professor,' she offered meekly. The rest of the crowd swung, drinks in hand, and several gulping noises were heard. McGonagall narrowed her eyes at them.

'Miss Granger, Mr. and Miss Weasley, Mr. Longbottom, Mr. Finnigan and Mr. Thomas, come with me. *Right* now.'

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'He let her go!' Bellatrix's screeching voice echoed in Snape's ear as he awoke. He nearly groaned aloud. Not with pain, but with the knowledge of what he would now suffer in the face of his lord's displeasure. So be it. He had chosen this path, and could not now undo what he had done. Nor would he if he could.

'Master, I watched him, he let her go! Are we to believe that the Master of Assassins could not catch or kill one girl?'

'Master,' Snape's throat was dry, but he forced his heavy eyelids back to stare into his lord's livid gaze, 'Master, you said as bait...I was trying to get the girl unharmed, feared that a misfired spell could land her in the fire where she would be no use to you.'

'How did she get outside the flame barrier?' Voldemort asked coldly. 'A barrier that burned a great deal of the gardens around this house, and I'm sure will result in much difficulty from the Muggle population, Bella.'

'Master, forgive me, the spell would have hit the girl, only Snape knocked me over.' Malice glittered undiluted in the wife of his old friend Rodolphus, and Snape felt his stomach sicken. He had never liked the oldest Black girl, and her fanatical devotion to the Dark Lord had coupled with intelligence warped and demented by Azkaban to make her truly frightening. And, it seemed, determined to ruin his standing. His mouth curved upwards with a grimly ironic smile. She could never bring him to his knees, not on her own. The Unbreakable Vow hung between them, the testament of his loyalty grinding on her—the promise to protect her nephew, and her own place as the formal witness of the binding that tied him to Narcissa Malfoy and the death of Albus Dumbledore.

Snape coughed violently, the explosive sound racking his body as he curled up, shuddering. 'My Lord...I can only promise that it was all accidental. Merlin knows I did not intend to stop Bella from killing the girl. As for escaping the flames, she must have had help from the

other side of the fire. She leapt through it, but was obviously not burned, for when I followed her, she, and three others, Stunned me.'

'You know the girl?' Voldemort asked softly.

'Yes,' Snape replied, just as quiet, striving for composure. 'I know the girl. She is a student of mine.'

'I surmised as much. And a friend of Potter's, here to get him out with the old man...is there any chance at all she recognized you?'

*Doubtless*, he thought instantly, but he quickly shook his head, sure to keep his eyes just slightly averted from his master's while he controlled his train of thought. 'No, my Lord, I did not speak in my usual voice, and I am certain she would not have recognized the one I adopted.'

'I see.' The Dark Lord's red eyes slotted as they stared at his servant. 'Get up.' Snape swung his legs over the side of the table he had been lying on and sat up. 'Rise, Severus Snape.' He stood on shaky legs. Four Stunners. He was lucky that they had been only students, and that Hermione's heart had not been in it. Full grown members of the Order might have caused enough damage to kill.

'I do not tolerate failure,' Voldemort began quietly. 'Now, given your previous... stellar...service,' the lord's eyes cut between Snape and Bellatrix, and it was clear that he was referring to the Vow, though neither of them had ever mentioned it, 'I believe that Bellatrix seeks to gain her own ends by blaming you. I find no reason to think that you deliberately sabotaged the plan, though I think it's clear that someone here did.'

'Master, you know that Severus could be the traitor-' Bellatrix started.

'Silence!' spat Voldemort. 'The boy was freed by an insider, true, but it takes significant work and time to remove those wards, and he was here giving instructions to one of his Assassins, I saw him myself. Blundering he may have been in this instance, but a traitor I think not.' He considered his erstwhile Death Eater thoughtfully.

'But you cannot fail me and hope for no punishment, my boy,' he whispered firmly. His wand slapped his palm like a schoolmaster's ruler. 'Look at me!'

The silently cast Legilimens granted the Dark Lord access to his servant's unresisting mind, and Snape frantically shoved his thoughts, his body still humming with the touch of Hermione, into a corner, locking them away.

'You *what?*' Eye contact broken, the lord stared at his servant, and lead filled Snape's stomach, vaulting into his throat to choke him as he held himself still. Perhaps he had not discovered it, perhaps it was some other detail, some incident that could be explained-

'Bonded?' Voldemort's red eyes narrowed to slits, rage igniting as his wand arm rose. '*Bonded?* My dear, *faithful* servant, how could you possibly have let *that* significant fact slip your mind?' The madness in Voldemort's eyes spiked, and Snape knew that Vow or no Vow, his own thoughts had done what Bellatrix's insinuations could not hope to accomplish.

As the lord's wand pointed steadily at his chest, Snape shut his eyes, tightened his body, and waited for the pain.

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'You have some nerve,' Professor McGonagall snapped as she ushered them all into her office and closed the door behind her. 'Miss Granger, for your serious lack of foresight and judgment, as well as your determination to put your housemates in mortal danger, I am going to take twenty points from Gryffindor and insist you have a detention with me if only to keep you out of trouble for an afternoon! I am shocked at your lack of good sense in this affair.'

Hermione nodded obediently and opened her mouth, points and detentions already forgotten in favor of something else, but Neville beat her to it:

'Please, Professor,' he asked anxiously, 'is Harry all right? Did he get out?'

McGonagall surveyed him sternly through her square lenses for a moment- and then her face softened into a small smile. 'Yes. He will be fine. A few bruises, some cuts, evidence of the Cruciatus...' her jaw tightened, but she forced the rest of the words through, 'and some obvious physical beating. He is in the hospital wing now, but he will recover.'

*At least physically*, Hermione thought bleakly. How long would Harry continue to stand up under the abuse that trampled him every year? She could already see the exhaustion stooping his form and blanking his once-excited face. The adventure that followed him everywhere and claimed those closest to him had taken their toll on the no-longer-child. She had seen the careful, almost fearful, look when he took Ginny's hand or touched her face. The fear of endangering yet another person. The shadow of pulling another in front of Voldemort.

'Irresponsible though your actions were,' McGonagall had continued, 'they were beyond noble, and very brave. But there can be no acknowledgement, no public congratulations. To do so would be to endanger you. Under no circumstances- Miss Granger, listen to me, *none*, may you embark on an excursion of this nature again. If you do, you will all have detentions until the end of term- to keep you safe.'

She waited for nods from each of them, and Hermione remembered the members of the Order racing to rescue them in the Department of Mysteries the night Sirius died. She swallowed hard. Yes, her friends were more to her than her life, but they had been helped twice, and if Snape had not been the Death Eater chasing her tonight...she shivered and thrust that thought away. He had saved her, and...

*I love you*. Over and over they echoed, brilliant in her mind, his tone of daunted admiration making her stomach flutter now that she was in the safety of the school.

'Can we see him, Professor?' Ron asked eagerly.

McGonagall seemed unable to contain the smile that touched her mouth. 'Absolutely. He was brought here from your house just moments ago, after the Headmaster ascertained that he was...healthy...enough to move.'

She found she was standing in an empty room, the students already out of the office and tearing towards the staircase that would take them to the hospital wing.

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'Harry! Harry, mate, are you all right?' They hurried down the ward to where Professor Dumbledore waited next to Harry's bed. Ron was first at his bedside, followed by Neville and Hermione. But Harry's green eyes were locked on Ginny as she approached slowly, the dread of what might greet her gaze making her feet heavy as she cast her eyes downward.

'Gin, he's fine, he's okay' Ron told her enthusiastically, gesturing his sister forward. Hermione smiled to herself. It was just like Ron to be too loud in this situation, his joy expressed in awkwardly filling any silence that might exist.

Harry gave Ginny a quirky half-smile when she met his gaze, a survivor's twitch of his mouth, but his eyes glittered in amusement at Ron's antics. Hermione's throat constricted. Snape bestowed that same smile on her in the moments after she healed him.

She threw her arms around him in a tight hug after Ginny had had her say, and Harry pounded her back, crying, 'Hermione! You're going to crush me!' She had just retreated, tears of relief touching the corners of her eyes, when a buckling, excruciating pain ripped through her abdomen and lit her nerves on fire. She doubled over, gagging with the force of the torture- distant, but the bond now strong enough to transfer over the miles between them...

'What-' Ron reached for her, his wand already coming out, only to be thrust backward roughly by Professor McGonagall as she slid her thin hands around her prodigal student.

'Albus,' she muttered in a low warning voice.

'I know,' he replied tersely.

'What can we do for her?'

‘Nothing. She will have to ride it out,’ he told his wife quietly. ‘This is a problem against which we have no cure, nor any way of discovering one. It is part of the price she pays.’

Hermione’s head snapped up, and terror burned in her chocolate brown eyes as she stared at the Headmaster. ‘He knows!’ she cried. ‘The Dark Lord knows!’ And she curled back into herself, slipped to her knees, vomited.

Minerva followed her down, holding back the curly hair even as her eyes locked with her husband’s. *He knows*. The Dark Lord knew.

‘Professor, what’s happening to her? What does the Dark Lord know?’ Harry was upright in bed, covers half torn off as he started up to help his friend. Neville and Ginny caught his arms as he stumbled slightly in his haste.

‘It’s a time-delayed curse,’ Dumbledore lied calmly, gesturing for Harry to climb back into his bed. The boy stayed where he was, eyes wide as he stared at a writhing Hermione.

‘You can put time-delays on them?’ Neville looked slightly sick.

‘Yes.’

‘What can we do for her? Make her stop, Professor,’ Harry whispered, his already pale face going green as he watched his best friend twist and spew under the invisible torturer, the spell that much worse for having no tangible source, no point of attack.

‘I cannot, Harry. I can do nothing for her. I think perhaps it will not last long...’

But his aging face betrayed his fear to those who knew him. Severus was an assassin, a spy, a double-agent, a man who had brought pain and endured it for most of his life. Hermione Granger, while undeniably tough and brave, could not withstand what Severus Snape could. What would leave him with a few hours bed rest and a headache might do her permanent damage, or kill her.

The Dark Lord knew-



'What did she mean, "The Dark Lord knows?"' Ron pressed, his eyes fastened on Hermione with a morbid fascination.

'I don't know, Ron,' the headmaster lied once again. 'I don't know.'

But if Severus' life was forfeit...was Hermione's as well?

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'Get up!' the lord spat furiously.

Snape nodded to the floor, his arms shaking as he knelt, vomit and bile rising in his throat from the pain. He suppressed them. He would die rather than watch the delighted expression on Bellatrix's face if he were sick in front of their lord. Taking a deep breath to steady himself, he pushed himself backwards and stood up, swallowing and wincing at the rawness of his throat, hoarse from screaming...

His knees buckled as the added weight of his rebounded pain surged from Hermione, and he seized the table to keep himself upright.

'Stand up properly, traitor,' Voldemort sneered, disappointment throbbing in his voice. His favorite had betrayed him, the man who had sworn to kill Albus Dumbledore had his own, private affair- a liberty Voldemort did not permit.

'My Lord,' Snape gasped, pushing away from the table and swaying as he stood, 'My Lord, allow me to explain.'

'Explain.' The drawn out word was insult and denial together, and Bellatrix cackled dementedly. No matter that she did not know the cause of their Master's sudden attack- it was enough that it was the object of her intense loathing.

'It is not my doing,' Snape whispered hoarsely, plunging ahead in spite of Voldemort's silence. 'It is an Unconscious Bond. Look in my mind, Master.'

Long fingers snatched his chin, lava glared into obsidian, and Snape felt the shaft of amazement as Voldemort encountered the unlikely

truth and withdrew with some sudden pensiveness from his servant's mind.

'Sit,' he commanded almost absently, the murderous fury vanishing as swiftly as it had struck, the red eyes consulting Snape's black ones. Steepling his fingers in front of him, his wand sliding into his pocket, he tapped the ends of his pale, spider-like hands together and frowned. 'We return, however, to the original question, my servant. Why did you not tell me?'

Snape swallowed his blood, bile and nerves. The abrupt quietness, the cool relaxation of his lord's anger, did not mean he was forgiven or understood. The next words he spoke would prove critical, determining his life or death.

'My Lord...it repulses me,' Snape started honestly, knowing that his master would have already gleaned that from his mind. 'She is a student and a Mudblood, and I-' he stopped, his master's hand rising to halt him.

The Dark Lord turned to the assembled Death Eaters, some half a dozen of them, and tilted his head towards the door.

'Dismissed,' he commanded.

Only great self control and immediate fear for his life kept Snape from smirking at Bellatrix's outraged expression, cheated of the show she was so keen to observe.

'But, Master-'

'Dismissed, Bella.' His voice sharpened. She did not have to be told again. She scurried out, and Snape eyed his master warily.

'None need to hear the details of your private life unless I wish them to,' Voldemort told him. Snape nodded mutely. Far from comforting, his stomach tightened further. Voldemort was not sparing him embarrassment out of kindness, but out of a need for secrecy, which could not bode well either for himself or his student.

‘Continue,’ Voldemort ordered. ‘Your thoughts tell me this bond is some six months or more old, and growing stronger. What has deterred your tongue all this time?’

‘I have been seeking to control it.’ More honesty. As much as he could possibly mix in, the lies had to remain slight and undetectable. ‘To be perfectly frank, my Lord, I could not understand the sense in telling you. There is nothing to be done about it- I would rather not soil myself with such filth- and my personal problems are hardly of consequence to your aims.’ Now the final edge, tip the balance- but delicately. Flattery would not win the Dark Lord’s approval.

‘I am serving you the best I can,’ he finished quietly. ‘I deemed it of little importance what...infatuation...I have developed for a student, and as such I decided not to bother you with the trivia. I apologize, my Lord, if I made a mistake.’

‘You did make a mistake.’ Voldemort flipped a hand. ‘But you have paid for it now, and I can put this fortunate turn of events to use.’

His mouth dried instantly. ‘Fortunate, my Lord?’

‘Don’t make me explain more than I have to, Severus,’ the pale man said coolly. ‘I know you take my meaning.’

Snape bowed his head, nodded slowly. ‘My Lord, consider- the girl is a student...I could not be of use as a spy if I were discovered.’ His laughter grated abruptly in the still room. ‘Can you imagine Dumbledore allowing me to stay on one instant if he knew I had slept with a student?’

‘You only have to last until June. No more,’ Voldemort reminded him. Silence descended, cloying and cold, with the reference to a pact made that Voldemort should not know about and of course did, his manipulations as finely tuned as his benevolent enemy’s. Snape knew he was out of time and excuses as he frantically flicked through his brain, any plea, any reason, any logic would do- he had to avert this, the next words that came out of the Dark Lord’s mouth would seal his duty...

'The child of the union will prove powerful. When it is born, bring it to me.'

Black eyes lifted to meet the searing red, and Voldemort arched an eyebrow. 'Whether or no your ethics find it repulsive, my servant, I know you will find the act enjoyable.'

*I know, Snape thought despairingly. I will. I will want it- it has almost consumed me anyway. As it has her. And in the end, because it cannot last any longer than it must...*

He rose, folded his arms to hide slender hands in long, black sleeves, and bowed fully from the waist.

'Your will be done, my Lord.'

## A Decision

Snape observed the rest of the Inner Circle filing back into the room with relish, locking eyes with each Death Eater as they stared, assessing him, the measure of his pain betraying their Lord's mood.

What few people on the side of the Light considered, Snape thought as he rose languidly to join them, all traces of torture vanished from his deliberately casual bearing, was Voldemort's tremendous healing abilities. To hold someone on the cusp between life and death, one had to know not only how to bring death, but also to restore life. And the Dark Lord was nothing if not accomplished in keeping a man hovering in that grey area, stabbing pain with each drawn breath- but capable of breathing, nevertheless.

The plan formulated, assured of his servant's loyalty and complete understanding of his error, the Dark Lord had healed him almost as instantly as he had inflicted wounds. Snape took his place in the circle of Death Eaters with only the lingering remembrance of pain in his muscles.

Bellatrix's noxious eyes locked on him, hatred festering in the black, a blossoming, poisonous gas. He shivered and deliberately turned away. The woman was lethal fanaticism disguised in human garb, and doing nothing to hide her displeasure at his comfort.

'The misunderstanding has been resolved,' Voldemort announced smoothly. His Death Eaters each nodded once, slowly. Snape was not the new whipping boy, nor was he fair game. In point of fact, Voldemort's clear approval, his ringing pronouncement, meant that someone else's neck now lay gathering splinters on the chopping block. As the room stiffened, Snape watched Lucius Malfoy's eyes spark with disappointment, and the barest hint of fear. His failure in the Department of Mysteries and the burden that had fallen on his son had proven to the previously-spoiled Death Eater that no matter his earlier services, it would not save him if Voldemort decided against him.

'However, we do have a different problem to solve.' The heart-chilling liquid of his voice flowed over them evenly, and none of the rigid figures moved. Snape could tell, from the shallow rise and fall of

robes, that some were barely breathing. Dread coated the room thickly, a syrup miring sound, movement, action, even breath, into a sticky, sweaty, slow mass.

Consciously, Snape leaned back against the table he was next to, long legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankles. It was a pose so casual that as a teacher he had never used it, not in front of his colleagues and certainly not before his students. It had never seemed right. But here, where Voldemort stalked penned prey, it was absolutely fitting, and Snape saw the gleam of support and silent laughter in his Lord's eye as Voldemort stared into faces, doing his elaborate dance, cranking up the tension, knowing the sound would be sweeter when he broke it.

'Wormtail,' he hissed, teeth dragging out the name. The short, rotund bundle of robes jumped at the voice behind him, Voldemort's winding path leading him to believe he had passed his Lord's silent, unexplained judgment. 'Why don't you enlighten us as to why you helped the Potter boy escape?'

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The fireplace flared green, and Dumbledore rose so quickly his chair toppled over behind him. He had left Harry in the infirmary only ten minutes earlier, and had been mindlessly scanning paperwork as he awaited the return of his colleague, a father's worry creasing his face as the golden second hand ticked towards later hours of the morning.

The blue eyes swept his spy with concern, followed swiftly by relief and curiosity. Snape's bearing did not tell the tale of one who had endured the Cruciatus, or indeed, any other kind of curse. His movement was languid, if exhausted, as he flowed out of the fireplace and seamlessly into his chair, seated before the flames changed from venomous green to their natural color once more.

'Severus? Are you well?' A teacup materialized mid-stride, and Dumbledore was handing it to his eyes and ears as the younger man sank into the cushions.

Snape breathed deeply, relaxing the effort he had been forced to exert over the last hours, starting with his Summons to the graveyard

much earlier that evening, and re-building his shields in a different direction, against a new opponent. He took the tea, gratitude glittering in his eyes for a moment, and quickly looked away. It would not do for Dumbledore to see into his mind unchallenged this early morning. He massaged his temple with one long index finger. It seemed an age since he had thrown Potter into the arms of the man in front of him, and seen Hermione's Stunning Spell released on him...

'She is-' came the hoarse murmur, before he could control himself. He lifted the cup to his lips to still the remainder of the question, wishing desperately that the sky-colored orbs trained on him were not witnessing this weakness.

'She is safe. So is Harry, my friend,' Dumbledore assured him softly. 'There were no casualties at the Riddle House, due in no small part to your efforts. Thank you.' Snape offered nothing, face still buried in his cup, so Dumbledore sallied forward. 'But we did have one here. Tom tortured you, didn't he?'

'What? Yes. Briefly. It was nothing-' he stopped, horrified. There was one there. To his warped perception, the minutes under the Cruciatus had vanished, an incident easily discarded as soon as the final vestiges of pain had vacated his limbs. But she, Hermione, would have endured it as well, and she had no stamina for such viciousness. He started from his chair, only to have the headmaster benignly wave him back into his seat, guessing the reason for his immutable concern.

'Madam Pomfrey saw to her, Severus. She will be all right. She is sleeping now, in the infirmary.' The blue eyes lost their gentleness as Dumbledore moved to straight to his point, the time for equivocation and niceties past. 'What did Tom ask you? What did he find? What does he suspect?'

'He believes that you dismantled the wards, with Wormtail's help. Tonight will be very unpleasant for the traitor.' Nothing could keep both spite and disgust from Snape's voice. Much as he had hated James Potter and Sirius Black, his contempt for the man who had betrayed his boyhood protectors was absolute.

Something flashed in Dumbledore's eyes, but he tamped it down- he would pursue that avenue of enquiry later- and pressed further. 'In the hospital wing, when Miss Granger doubled up in borrowed pain from your torture, she said, "He knows." What does Tom know? What specifically?'

Snape had prepared himself for the headmaster's question, though he had prayed it would not be necessary to drop his smooth lie. But Dumbledore had left him little option, so his mouth opened and the words tumbled swiftly. 'We are lucky, Headmaster, it was nothing. I feared for a moment that he had indeed discovered my...' Here he let his breath hitch just the right amount. It was not hard to force. Regardless of the lie, his emotions regarding his bond-mate were entirely genuine. 'My attachment to Miss Granger. But he had not, only some information that I had researched about the Kin Wards, so he assumed that I-'

'Does he know your true loyalties?' Dumbledore interrupted hurriedly.

'No. I was able to assuage his temper once he allowed me on my feet, and the blame for Potter's escape has shifted.'

'To Peter Pettigrew.' Snape lifted his head in surprise, the sorrow in Dumbledore's voice bringing his temper to the fore.

'The fool has sold out anyone who ever befriended him, Headmaster, including the friends that protected him fiercely as a boy and the family that housed him for a dozen years as a rodent. He has no redeemable qualities. Save your pity for those who deserve it.'

'I fear that by now I have enough pity to dose the whole world.' Loneliness haunted the blue eyes, and Snape swallowed, his grief rising sharply. The impulse to divulge the truth of his meeting with the Dark Lord nearly pushed the truth of his tongue, but the weary look disappeared as the headmaster abruptly switched tracks and the moment evaporated. 'Severus, if you are not too exhausted, I would like for you to keep watch over Harry. Just for tonight. The ordeal he's been through in the past month...he should not be left alone. He's in the hospital wing.' The spy's face twisted with displeasure, both at the task and the sleep he would lose doing it, but he did not object. The likelihood that Voldemort would launch a counterstrike was small, but



the children of Death Eaters walked the halls of Hogwarts, and there was no guarantee that one of them wouldn't attempt to curry favor by handing him the master of all prizes. And agreement would get him out of this office before he betrayed himself.

'Stimulating Draught is kept in the hospital wing,' Snape answered his affirmative, rising in a sweep of black cloth. 'If you'll excuse me, Headmaster?'

The older man inclined his head, fingers tapping together as his employee left, and felt the first stirrings of unease regarding his spy. Snape had made it possible to rescue Harry that night, it was true, but the downcast to his eyes, the voiceless way he had accepted the post of sentry to Harry, at the expense of his own rest...Severus Snape was hiding some fact or emotion. Something important. Dumbledore's hadn't seen his professor's eyes that guarded in many years, and he could not help but feel that it did not bode well.

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Harry awoke in the dark to find a too-solid shadow seated next to his bed. He stopped the sharp breath that would have been a gasp and continued to breathe deeply as if he were still asleep, closing his eyes most of the way to squint through his eyelashes at the figure.

It was very still, as if it were waiting, and a sense of solemn melancholy drooped the head and rounded the shoulders inwards. With the sixth sense that had kept him alive for more than five years as he battled Voldemort, Harry knew this person meant him no harm.

'I know you're awake, Potter.'

Harry winced. Well, "no harm" might be a bit strong. "No permanent damage" was probably a better way to describe what his professor wished on him. As he opened his eyes fully, the stooped shoulders and tucked chin disappeared, leaving only the familiar sneer and hooded black eyes as his professor lit a candle next to his bed to cast his gaunt cheeks in shadow.

Harry forced his face into a semblance of neutrality. Nothing in the world could make him forgive Snape, or despise him one jot less. The

memory of his Potions professor viciously taunting Sirius in the months before he died, eyes glittering with the purely malicious joy borne only in hurting one you hated, seemed permanent, etched in relief on Harry's mind whenever he looked at his taciturn professor. Whatever Snape's work for the Order, they paid for it at the enormous price of enduring him.

But even loathing could not blind Harry to the immense tiredness in the man before him, or the evidence of long-suffered pain. And Harry recalled the long, strong hands belonging to a Death Eater that had unbound him, seized his wrists, and thrown him into the arms of Albus Dumbledore in the Riddle House that night.

'Yes, Professor,' he finally responded, propping himself up to reach for his glasses and bring the slightly blurred world into focus.

'You do not need those. Go back to sleep. The Headmaster and the Minister will doubtless wish to see you on the morrow, and it would not do for the Boy-Who-Lived-to-Nearly-Kill-the-Rest-of-Us to fall asleep in an interview.' The coldness of a lifetime could not be erased from his voice, but the tone was far more civil than Harry had ever heard Snape direct towards him. He blinked and put his glasses on anyway, getting a good look at the man as curiosity vied with his hatred for the first time. Hermione had always insisted, as he and Ron rolled their eyes, that no matter how Snape treated them, he was on the side of the Light, and should be accorded respect...

And this man, this dark, cold, quiet, introspective guardian, sat at his bedside, hands folded together in his lap as if he had no where else to be. No where else he wanted or thought he should go, though the rings under his eyes shone black in the candlelight, and he certainly was not sleeping as he sat there.

A sudden shame flooded Harry for the ill will he had wished and still heaped upon this man who, in spite of his sneers, had done his best to defend him. Always. *And he even called for the Order, Harry recalled bleakly, he tried to help me, to help us, to save us in the Department of Mysteries. He did not send Sirius...*

'Sir-'

'I said go to sleep. As much difficulty as you have following the simplest of instructions, obey this one!' the professor spat, and Harry felt his jaw tighten, shame and curiosity vanishing together at the snap, so much like his classroom demeanor, in his words.

'Yes, sir,' he muttered, yanking off his glasses and putting them down on the bedside table. The candle shadows flickered briefly as Harry turned away, and then the room was in darkness, no moonlight penetrating the windows.

Harry felt the presence remain at his back for a long time as he tried to force himself to sleep, the abrupt humanity of his previously utterly inhuman professor preying on his mind.

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'*Your will be done, my Lord.*' Severus felt his gut twisting as he sat by the boy's bed, head in his hands. She was two beds away, resting easily, recovering from the impact of the Cruciatus Curse his lord had subjected him to.

'*The child of the union will prove powerful. When it is born, bring it to me.*' And his reply, his subservient, mealy-mouthed reply...his stomach roiled. The Dark Lord knew him too well, knew that his body was giving way, that he could not survive her presence in the castle until Christmas without claiming her, and Voldemort had just channeled that energy for him, given it purpose. If he believed Snape was loyal, he was truly doing him a favor.

But Snape's sympathies and efforts lay with this sleeping child who was crowned by a mess of black hair like his father's, and the old and slowly-dying most powerful wizard of the age. And her. Always her. A seething vision of his hands tangling in her hair, of the softness of her mouth, the liquid of her tongue seared through him- hot and strong and blinding. His dream-self moved hands from tumbling curls to smooth, unbroken, swelling breasts...

Sheets rustled from the boy in the bed in front of him, and Snape realized as he automatically reached into his pocket for his wand that his hands were fisted furiously, and his groin was stirring as Harry quieted his movement.

Memory overlaid the pleasant dreamscape. In her eyes on the graveyard ground, her shoulders curled in as she scrambled upright- only to be consciously pulled back as she glared into his face- there had been disgust. Not hatred, for that was a black emotion, but contempt, a silent condemnation for his bone-white mask, his heavy dark robes, his hooded head. And tonight he had earned that scorn to its full- the rolling events of his betrayal set in motion.

And yet...her defiance had not rung with rejection. Would that it had! If anything, the disdain had been fully tempered with hope, and the rising tide of emotions that matched his own. And he did not deserve them. Slytherin that he was, he could only twist and use them...and she would hate herself for not seeing him for what he would become.

Potter's heavier breathing told the older man that he was asleep. His mouth twisted as he rose silently. Here he was, watching over a Potter. The same as it had been since the boy had arrived at Hogwarts. Why was it always them? Why did the world- or at least, his own existence- spin at a Potter's bidding? He owed them his life, and now owed the son his safety from the lord he had sworn to obey years past, regardless of price, and this one would be high. His gaze drifted to the bed of his elusive, desirable student, and his feet followed, moving seemingly of their own accord.

His night vision allowed him to navigate the beds unhindered until he was watching the rise and fall of the sheets directly over Hermione. She, too, was sleeping deeply, the pain of the Cruciatus wiped away by Madam Pomfrey, Voldemort's healing spells, and rest. His relief when he had seen that her collapse and pain had been brief and without permanent cost had shown plainly on his face, and he had been grateful that the infirmary was completely empty when he made his inspection.

Harry, as it turned out, was not asleep. His breathing had deepened as he prepared to slip back into slumber, and then the movement next to his bed tightened his body, tensed his muscles...but he kept his breathing even, pretending, even as his eyes fluttered open to slits, watching his professor wind through the infirmary to his friend, a few beds away. The usually vitriolic, saturnine professor gazed down at his best friend with an expression doubled with fear and pain, and

something inexplicable, indefinable. A fierce, protective, affection. His eyes widened involuntarily, and Harry firmly narrowed them again, resisting the urge to rise, to stare, to challenge him, his emotions bubbling hot and furious in his stomach and throat as he watched his unmoving, cold professor.

Snape's chest tightened, and he clasped his hands behind his back to keep from reaching out to touch the curls splayed across the pillow beneath her head, unaware of his silent observer. If she woke...his tenuous self-control would surely snap if those chocolate brown eyes opened. Demons driven by lust howled within him now, driving him to touch her, to feel the completeness that he had felt in the middle of the flame, rolling with her and around her, his body engulfing hers. He had lied to Dumbledore. He would follow Voldemort's orders.

He turned away from her abruptly, not seeing his ward's green eyes crunch shut to save himself, and resumed his bedside vigil with Potter, shoulders stooped once again in mourning.

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'How do you feel?' Harry asked Hermione softly in the morning after he had squirmed to wakefulness to see her sitting up in bed and gazing steadily out of the great glass windows.

'Fine,' she replied distantly. She turned to face him, a smile pushed onto her face, but it looked strange, and even her words sounded unnatural when she added, 'And you?'

'Much better. D'you know what happened to you?'

'No.' Again, the tone had become distracted, and she was once more staring out the window. Harry started to speak, and stopped. Snape had been here in the middle of the night, just sitting over him and watching. And he had gone to Hermione's bedside and simply looked at her for a long moment. A protector should he- they?- need protection. And something else. There had been so much more in Snape's stance, in the sighs of his breath, than obligation. But the professor was no longer there and Hermione seemed strange. Fear clustered around his heart. Had he cursed her last night? Wordlessly and without a wand so that Harry hadn't seen?

‘Are you sure? Professor Dumbledore said you were under a time-delayed curse, and Snape was here last night-’

This prompted an instant response. Her head snapped around, brown eyes focusing on him. ‘Professor Snape?’

Harry blinked at the sudden intensity of her regard, uncomfortably aware that the at least the ferocity mirrored that of his professor. ‘Erm...yes. He was guarding us. Well- me. Well...watching, really, not so much guarding-’ But as he spoke, her eyes dimmed, the intensity fading, as if coming back under control.

‘Hermione, what’s wrong?’ he pressed.

‘Nothing Harry. I’m...I’m tired,’ she finally managed. Skepticism radiated from his raised forehead, but he sensed that now was hardly the time to insist, and he pulled the curtains around his bed shut to dress.

Hermione barely heard the rasp of the metal rings putting away her best friend. Her eyes saw unseeing the freezing lake, the snow-patched lawn melting in the sun, the Quidditch pitch with its bright yellow hoops. But her mind had locked on a different image. The memory of black cloak, white mask and dark eyes. Killer’s eyes. Underscored by the voice that coldly promised her as a toy to a Death Eater.

And a voice in her head- a voice that carried everything she had ever wished to hear from him, a voice that spoke of admiration and pride, of regret and sorrow, of fear and love. *I love you*. Would it hold her the rest of her life, this double image, the Death Eater mask overlaying the face of someone who had risked his life to save her?

As the blissful memory of peace at his touch crinkled her eyes, her mind vaulted out suddenly, needing to know where he was and if he was safe... The strength of the feedback made her gasp. Instantly, Harry’s curtains snapped back and a worried face peered at her.

‘Hermione?’

'I'm all right,' she smiled and it was genuine this time. He was in the castle, and in spite of the torture that had prompted Madam Pomfrey and Professor McGonagall to insist on her overnight in the hospital wing, *he* seemed perfectly fit.

'I'm hungry,' she announced, swinging her legs over the bed. Harry blinked at her sudden reversal of mood, mentally shrugged, chalked it up to "female mysteries", and grinned.

'Me too. I bet the house-elves are dying to be of service.'

'Harry James Potter!' she said sternly, but neither could keep straight faces as they laced up their shoes and, with a swift glance at the closed door of the ward office, snuck out of the hospital wing and made their way towards the kitchens.

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The remembrance of the completeness brought by touching her professor haunted Hermione, burrowing into her skin and kneading like a pampered cat- consistent, constant, maddening. Her need to touch him reached a fever pitch by the following morning.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was right after breakfast.

All of her internal organs, tubes, muscles and perhaps a rib were lodged in her throat as she tried to eat. She had not seen him either at dinner the night before, nor was he here this morning. She had not seen him since Stunning him, and had felt nothing from him after his torture. His hovering existence perched like a bird of prey in her thoughts and at the back of her brain, a falcon forever ready to swoop, potential energy dammed at a floodgate.

Walking to Defense, she felt as if she were treading air, the soles of her feet did not seem to touch the ground, and her ears turned on and off- filled with the boisterous noise of her classmates and the stillness of the graveyard. And no amount of swallowing could dislodge her heart, or return the stomach that seemed to have disappeared. She would finally lay eyes on him, finally be able to look at him...

He was in the classroom as the class filed in, voices fading to murmurs in his inhibiting presence. She made to cross the threshold and gripped the doorframe, lust nearly bringing her to her knees. She dimly heard his simultaneous gasp at the front of the room, saw the heads turn to face this uncharacteristic display of emotion from their staid professor, his face whiter than the new-fallen snow as his black eyes locked on hers.

‘Miss Granger,’ he ground out, fighting with his tongue and his body for every syllable, ‘Get. Out.’

She did not have to be told again. With an effort in-humanly hard, she shoved herself away from the door, stumbling into the corridor and finally collapsing on her knees on the stone, the remnants of their class passing her curiously, their few muted, concerned questions falling on deaf ears.

‘Potter, if you leave my classroom, you’ll have detentions for the next year,’ she heard Snape spit, a few seconds before a friendly hand descended on her shoulder, squeezing. She was looking into Ron’s blue eyes, Harry’s messy hair beyond them.

‘Hermione...’ Ron’s total concern, barely masking bafflement, struck an unexpectedly amused chord within her, and as the boys pulled her to her feet, she smiled through the assault to her self-control and shook her head.

‘Stupid of me, really, thinking he’d forget,’ she lied quietly. ‘He’s angry at me. For Stunning him.’

‘I thought you said it wouldn’t matter?’ Harry growled angrily at this fresh injustice. All remnants of charity he had granted his professor in the hospital wing vanished in a flash of heat. The look in his hated professor’s eyes in the hospital wing did not tally with the ashen-faced fury that had just erupted, and Harry’s anger surged towards its target. ‘I thought the bastard wanted you to do it? That he *understood*?’

Her grin was weaker now, her emotions and Harry’s draining the false brightness. Her hands clutched at them, wrapping around their forearms to keep herself upright. ‘I guess I was wrong.’



'Potter, Weasley,' the curt voice came from just inside the door, the frame keeping him from sight as longing suffused her again. 'I believe I gave you a specific instruction. The entire class is waiting for you to finish your threesome.'

Both boys blushed in mortification, and Hermione allowed an angry thought to wing directly from her brain and into Snape's. No response. Like dropping stones in a long, empty well.

'Go on,' she whispered. 'I'll be all right.'

'You're not coming?'

'I can't.' The boys exchanged worried looks over her bowed head, and Harry opened his mouth, ready to completely disregard Snape, only to have Ron's elbow in his ribs. Whatever Hermione's problem with Snape, the young wizard knew his wild-haired friend would not reveal it until she was ready.

'Meet you after class?' Ron asked anxiously. Hermione nodded an almost absent assent as she slumped against the stone. With two final concerned glances, the boys reluctantly withdrew into the classroom to greet Snape's harsh berating and loss of House points.

The door slammed, the oak and stone and some fifty feet of air all that separated them... the castle was getting too small for both of them to survive there.

Groaning, she pushed off the wall that she had leaned on for support, and made herself focus on the conscious movement of her legs, the insistent need making her passage slow and faintly painful. She turned the corner and kept going, each step away making it a little easier to make the next.

Her destination took the shape of one familiar stone gargoyle. Regardless of consequence, she had to see the Headmaster.

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'Hermione.' Dumbledore's blue eyes were grave, only a little of their lustrous sparkle twinkling as he lifted his head to greet her entrance.

She walked through the door without knocking, weariness marking her stride. 'What brings you to my humble abode?'

'I think you know, sir.'

He considered her carefully, his sharp eyes scanning her, much like a Muggle x-ray- and far more intrusive. She had heard of his vaunted powers of both Legilimancy and Occlumancy, and averted her gaze. When he did not prompt her, she spoke of her own volition. 'I do not want to waste your time, sir, so I will endeavor to be brief. I wish to leave Hogwarts, Professor, and complete my magical education elsewhere.'

'I see.' His long fingers tapped his desk, and a frown slashed across his features. This was not entirely unexpected, though it was disheartening that it was her first and preferred solution. 'Shall I understand from your presence here at this hour that you can no longer attend class with Professor Snape?'

'Yes, sir.' She had not intended her anguished whisper, but her throat closed as she replied, and she hastily turned her head, embarrassed.

'Do not be embarrassed or worried by this,' he soothed gently. 'It is not of your doing, and neither is it his fault. I do not blame either of you.'

'That doesn't matter,' came her immediate reply, and she closed her eyes, a blush of humiliation flooding up her cheeks. 'I'm sorry, sir, but...Professor Dumbledore...it's so hard.' Voice still closed, she felt unexpected tears flood to her eyes, and she blinked them rapidly. 'He saved my life in the battle at the Riddle House,' she said quietly, unsure why she was continuing. 'And in the middle of that stupidity, with Death Eaters behind me and purple flame trapping me to the Dark Lord's house...he picked me up. When he touched me...it was the most peaceful I've felt since last May.' Her dark eyes were bright as they locked with his. 'Professor- send me away. To France. Or Australia. Or anywhere. Please.'

Dumbledore sighed, his eyes falling closed as he leaned back in his chair, knowing that he had to deny her plea. 'I can't. Harry needs you.'

The Order needs you, Hermione.' *And will need you even more when this year is done.*

'Professor Snape is in danger if I stay.'

'He is always in peril, my dear.'

'It is worse now- fatal, even. The Dark Lord *knows*, sir. I could not be...' Her throat closed once more and she cleared it firmly before finishing. 'I cannot be responsible for his death, sir.'

'Severus has assured me that he does not know about your strange- shall we say, affinity, for one another,' Dumbledore comforted. 'He said it was a different mistake, another detail of information that Tom found and tortured him over.'

Hermione stared, opened her mouth, snapped it shut. The raw panic in Snape's thoughts, and the rapid spiral into guilt and pain and a dread so solid it had left her breathless before his contortions played out in her limbs, had left her with no doubts as to what it was that Voldemort had gleaned from him. But if he had not seen to fit to tell Dumbledore, then she would not.

She hesitated, unsure now what to say, how to proceed. It had not occurred to her that Snape would lie, that he would downplay the danger he was now in. She had assumed that offering- asking- to transfer would solve several problems in one neat bundle. She had not expected Dumbledore to refuse. As she studied her hands, she became aware of his gaze- neither stifling, nor too curious, nor reading her...just waiting.

She knew what she wanted. Her head came up.

'Sir...will you teach me?'

He did not even have the grace to look startled at her change of tactics. 'Occlumency? Yes, my dear, I believe I will.' The solemnity of his promise startled her, and the corner of his mouth twitched. 'Harry may be the man sealed by prophecy, but never believe that I do not fully understand that value of yourself- and Mr and Miss Weasley, and Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood and the many other

students and members of the Order that fight this battle alongside him. You will need Occlumency to survive this assault of the mind, and I shall be honored to give you that tool.'

Hermione nodded briefly, the tilt of her chin and quiet gratitude in her eyes a mimicry of the expression that he had so often seen her bond mate wear. 'Thank you, Headmaster,' she murmured.

'I will send one of the house-elves to you with a note, Hermione, as long as that is not too objectionable?' The blue eyes glittered, and she almost laughed. He must know by now that she had long since surrendered her crusade for creatures who didn't want the rights she had attempted to gain for them.

'Yes, sir. Thank you.' He winked at her and bent his silver head to his paperwork as she slid out the oak door.

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'Hermione?'

Ron's voice startled her from the window, and she jumped in her seat, turning to face her two friends with a small smile. 'Hi. How was class?'

'Snape is Snape, and class was the same,' Harry replied impatiently, sitting on the arm of her chair. He opened his mouth and she quickly cut him off, delaying the inevitable interrogation.

'Did you get detention?'

'Next Wednesday.' He brushed that off too, hand waving in dismissal. 'Hermione... what happened?'

Hermione swallowed, looked away again. She could never lie to these two while staring them in the face. 'Nothing.'

'Not nothing,' Ron insisted, coming round the chair to kneel next to her, his wide blue eyes steadily meeting hers. 'Definitely something. Come on, Hermione. I know I may be a bit thick sometimes, but we aren't blind. Something's bothering you. What is it?'

'It's really not important...I told you- he's a little touchy about me Stunning him in the battle.'

'He didn't look angry today,' Harry challenged flatly, the memory of Snape's face finally clicking into place. 'He looked terrified.'

Her stomach tightened, but she shrugged. 'He was furious at us for going. Says he wouldn't have had to protect me- all of us, really, if we hadn't gone. We wouldn't have had to Stun him.' A moment, she waited for the explosion, and then:

'He's right,' Harry murmured. Ron stared at him. 'You shouldn't have come. If I'd gotten out, only to find out that one of you died trying to help...'

'We had to go, mate. We weren't leaving you there on your own,' Ron replied firmly. 'That's always the way of it. You know me'n'Hermione'n'Ginny'll come for you anywhere.'

Harry smiled tiredly, his young face older as he gazed at his best friend, shadows darkening the green eyes. 'We've been through this, Ron. *Don't* do it again. If I die, someone has to be left to defeat Voldemort. I don't think that prophecy has all the answers. I want you safe and out of the way. Both of you.'

Heavy silence descended, brown and blue eyes studying the distant, cool focus of the hope of the wizarding world. Harry's gaze sharpened once more on Hermione. 'But you...you've been... avoiding...Snape all year.'

'What?' The snap of her head, the swiftness and clipped nature of the question all betrayed her, and the boys shared a quick look. 'Avoiding? I have never sought him out.'

'You nursed him this summer. You worked with him at the Burrow. You showed him up spectacularly at the beginning of the year. And now you no longer even raise your hand in his class.'

'I have nothing left to prove to Severus Snape,' she responded, and her voice, so firm and almost contemptuous, sounded very little like her own, and very much like the man they were discussing. She

reached for her bag, pointedly ending the conversation. 'He was livid after the battle, but since Professor McGonagall had already assigned us all detention, he didn't get to, and so I guess he is venting his anger in other ways. It gave me time to do so catch-up reading in the library.' With that, her Arithmancy book emerged from her bag and flipped open, her eyes already rapidly scanning the pages of complicated runes.

Once again, jade green and sea-blue met in agreement and silent perplexity over the head of their withdrawing friend, sharing the sense of a widening gulf they could not bridge, a wedge driving farther everyday as Hermione retreated into a private world of work- and the secret she guarded.

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Snape contemplated the essay in front of him, shoved it away with a growl and rose in a fluid motion, his long legs instantly finding his pacing stride.

He had lied to Albus Dumbledore. It had been easy, telling his employer that it was not the bond that the Dark Lord had discovered but the information that Snape had told Dumbledore about the wards surrounding Harry Potter, thereby aiding the boy to escape. He reflected wryly that for all his wonderful insight about human nature, the headmaster had demonstrated quite clearly that he did not fully grasp Tom Riddle. If, indeed, helping Harry Potter had been the slice of Snape's mind that the Dark Lord had stumbled across, Snape would not have survived. As, doubtless, Wormtail would not.

But he had not wanted Dumbledore's long nose in this business. His shame bound him in silence- as it would her.

*I cannot disobey. If I do...everything is forfeit. The headmaster's life. Hers. Mine. Probably Draco's and possibly Narcissa's. All for the honor of one girl.*

It was not only honor. He knew that if he took her to his bed, and then fulfilled the Unbreakable Vow, her self-loathing would consume her, defile her. He could only keep her alive at the cost of her liveliness, the last scraps of her childhood and the innocence he cherished.

Ink and glass splattered on stone as he threw his inkwell, relishing in the shattering sound as it struck the wall and burst on the granite.

He had no choices. Pawns did not protest their king's maneuvers.

Swallowing the bile that threatened to strangle him as it rose in his throat, he ruthlessly suppressed his conscience, and sent a questing tendril of thought to the girl. He felt her touch it, his knees weakened briefly at the instant emotional flood, and he sat at his desk, drawing his mind into the tight box that had always contained it. He had to find a way to talk himself out, to logic it through. There had to be a flaw, some final, fatal, flaw that he could exploit, present to Voldemort, talk them out of this.

*I can't.*

*You want to.*

*I can't.*

*Her safety.*

*I can't.*

*Your safety.*

*I can't.*

*Then you will lose the war.*

*I don't have to make this choice!*

*No. And if you don't, you will spend the remainder of your exceedingly short life paying for it.*

With a shudder, he dropped his head into one hand, massaging his temples. He did not have a choice. The Dark Lord wanted it, badly enough to place Snape's position with the Headmaster in jeopardy just months before his planned demise. He had to do it. For her, for himself, for Dumbledore and most of all for the Order of the Phoenix and Harry bloody Potter.

So he would.

Savagely, he yanked a roll of parchment towards himself and started making slashes across an essay in bright red ink, the brittle paper seeming to bleed under his furious strokes.



## Culmination

Ron kicked a stone into the lake, tucking his shoulders against the wind, hands in his pockets as the stiff breeze lifted his red hair from his forehead. It was Halloween, Harry had been back at Hogwarts for ten days, and the blue eyes of the youngest Weasley son brewed uncertainty and loneliness.

Harry's imprisonment in the Riddle House had left Ron's raven-haired friend coldly withdrawn, possessing the isolation and discipline of an army commander. Even captaining the Quidditch team was a lesson in battle tactics, and he spoke to his players in the terse tone of a general, green eyes distant, distracted, shuttered. It was the look Sirius had worn in the months before his death, and it frightened the sixteen-year-old who had been Harry's constant companion through their often dangerous, always trying, Hogwarts career. But Harry had entered a private world, an exclusive hell, where Ron could not follow- and did not wish to.

Harry only stirred back into present reality when worried by the third member of their trio, the tangle-haired witch that both boys now guarded jealously. The translucent, exhausted quality that the small woman had exuded since Harry's rescue made Ron's heart ache with worry- and her unbroken silence only deepened the boys' fears.

He ran his fingers through his short hair, a futile attempt to tame it against the breeze. Difficult though it was to admit, and impossible to understand, the bushy-haired, bossy know-it-all he had adored and fallen in love with was gone. She had been replaced by a quietly assured, adult woman whom he admired, but no longer knew how to approach. Something heavy weighed her tongue, and occasionally crippled her body. Her sudden twinges and pains had lessened, but not vanished, and he and Harry had spent many hours combing books and watching the fire dwindle in the common room as they tested and discarded theories as to what caused them. Hermione knew, but their repeated attempts to win her confidence in this matter had continued to fail.

Perhaps most disturbing was her refusal to discuss her two private meetings with the Headmaster. At least Harry's sporadic nights with

Dumbledore were always thoroughly torn apart and mulled over. But whatever the Headmaster and Hermione talked about behind the oak door, it stayed there. And her cheeks were drawn, her appetite almost vanished, her skin growing paler with each passing day, her thin hands white, almost ethereal. Whatever they did, it didn't seem to be doing her any good.

He felt a presence at his shoulder, and his hand was withdrawing his wand before he realized it was comforting and stationary, not the cold movement of a predator. He glanced over to find Lavender Brown, hazel eyes locked on the grey-blue water, school robes tangling and waving furiously against her legs as the wind flowed through them.

'Sickle for your thoughts?' she offered quietly, meeting his gaze.

His mouth quirked upwards in a partial smile. 'Nothing much.'

'Hmm. Like Harry and Hermione.' The unexpected knowingness of the comment stung, and Ron faced her fully, his anger and frustration of the last week biting into his voice.

'What do you mean by that?'

The girl lifted her eyebrows at him. 'They were in the common room last night, looking broody, as they will do sometimes. I asked them the same thing. They gave me the same answer. What's happening?'

He shook his head, turning back out to the water. 'I don't know. I'm not sure I know either of them anymore, Lavender.' The last part tumbled out before he could censor it, and he clenched his teeth, lest his mouth continue to betray more than he wished.

'Sometimes that's the way of things.'

'Not with us. Not before the battle,' he murmured, and he was mortified to find his voice choking closed.

She did not reply, and he realized belatedly that she did indeed have some sense of his fears in her own life. Both of her parents had joined the Order of the Phoenix.

‘They’ll come around,’ she finally offered. ‘You’ve fought before.’

Ron shook his head. ‘This isn’t a fight. It’s much, much...’ he waved his hands in a vague gesture. ‘Worse? Confusing, maybe? Harry and Hermione are, I don’t know, battling internal demons or something, and I’m not. I don’t have any.’

‘Hey.’ It was her turn to give him a lopsided smile, one that reached her eyes to illuminate sadness. ‘We can’t all carry battle scars.’ This earned a snort. Though Lavender had never seen them, Ron’s chest still carried the puffy, corrupted star of scarring that the brain tentacles had imprinted in the Department of Mysteries. Silence, then, ‘Walk around the lake?’

Ron looked at her, and felt as though he were seeing her for the very first time. Her hair still fell in gentle layers around the same heart-shaped face. Her dark eyes were still rimmed in black, long eyelashes seemingly longer with their black mascara, but the vaguely annoying, giggling, Trelawny-worshipping student had vanished. Like his one-time girlfriend, Lavender Brown had become a woman. A beautiful woman.

‘Sure.’

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‘All right, Harry?’ The time-honored greeting of Colin Creevey lifted Harry’s mouth briefly as the young hero sat in an armchair, trying to finish his homework. He felt that facing and escaping Voldemort now four times on top of spending a month chained in a room in the Riddle House should exempt him from essays to be graded with ‘D’s by Snape, but Dumbledore had sadly not agreed. He couldn’t ask Ron for help. His oldest friend had disappeared, to where Harry didn’t know, and understood silently that he almost didn’t care. He loved Ron like a brother, but there was just too much now that they did not, could not, share.

It had been easy, for two days. Easy to concisely give a statement about his imprisonment to the Minister of Magic, easy to go to class, easy to enter banal conversation, easy to pretend amidst all the well-

wishes, sympathetic teachers and the pile of extra homework he had to make up that it didn't matter, hadn't happened...

*Harry awoke, bleeding, searing pain in his side bringing him from fuzziness to clarity in a matter of seconds. An attempt to move brought stabs that induced a moan of pain, and he settled for opening his eyes.*

*Glasses, lenses miraculously whole and streaked with dirt, still aided his eyes, and he twisted his head slowly, seeking some familiarity to his surroundings. And as his eyes settled on a shadow just a shade too dark to be natural, red eyes met his gaze and his scar seared.*

*Harry arched his back against the floor, his ribs re-adjusted, tearing flesh as the broken bones responded to the torque of his spine. He was already panting and gasping, and Voldemort had not so much as 'Crucio'ed him yet.*

*'Good evening, Potter. Welcome to my humble abode.'*

That had been all the Dark Lord had said. And Harry had not seen him, one of his Death Eaters or food or water for the next two days.

He shivered in his chair, the remembered pain sharpening once more in his newly-mended ribs. The Dursleys had ignored him, he had been bitten by a basilisk, lost the bones of his arm, fallen from his broomstick twice, watched Cedric Diggory die and led his friends almost to their deaths in the Department of Mysteries. But the past month of his life had impressed deeply on the young wizard, already too aware of the gaping difference between himself and his peers, that there was no one to explain this away, to soothe the pain and provide the reason for it. He had suffered, not for some grand statement but because it was a war and because he was a soldier. And only Voldemort's desire to use a Dark-Moon Samhain to perform the rite that would have killed Harry had ended up saving his life. Had the Dark Lord simply wished to execute him, he would not have survived.

'Harry?'

Hermione's voice intruded on his increasingly darker thoughts, and Harry looked up quickly, standing almost instinctively. His pre-occupations had not blinded him to the fragile state of his friend, and Ron's complete helplessness regarding her following the battle at the Riddle House. At first, Harry had suspected that Hermione felt responsible for placing them all in danger- it was, after all, she who created the Portkeys and spearheaded the attack made by Dumbledore's Army, but her continuing, deepening depression had made it too clear that the battle was not what was preying on her mind.

'Hermione. How was your day?'

She smiled tiredly as she sank into the chair he had vacated for her. 'Tiring. I didn't know Occlumency could be this exhausting.'

Harry perched himself instantly on the arm of her chair. It was the first she had mentioned this. 'Is that what you're doing with Dumbledore?' He knew he had failed to keep his voice as casual as he wished, but that was immaterial in the face of her inadvertent admission.

She laughed quietly. 'Yes. You and Ron are so eager to know, so, yes. It's Occlumency lessons. Not worth badgering me about every time I walk into the room, is it?'

'Why isn't Snape teaching you?' His question was asked neither at random nor out of curiosity. He had discovered that mentioning their Defense professor was the surest way to garner a reaction from the suddenly-secretive girl.

She stiffened slightly in her chair, and bit the edges of her mouth, drawing them into her teeth. 'Professor Snape no longer wishes to teach me anything. You know I'm not attending Defense anymore, either, Harry. Professor Dumbledore said that I was to do a private reading with him in the subject.'

Harry frowned. Last year, he had wanted nothing more than to drop Occlumency with Snape. Dumbledore hadn't even tried to listen to him. Now, Hermione not only was allowed to drop Snape's class- arguably the most vital for her survival- but she was learning Occlumency from the Headmaster himself.

Not for the first time in recent days, Harry devoutly wished that he knew the details of all that had transpired between his increasingly introspective friend and his most despised professor. The only thing that was abundantly clear to the young man was that Snape was responsible for Hermione's pale face and the black gouging deep circles under her dark eyes.

'Hermione-' he started, and she rose abruptly, sensing the direction the discussion was going.

'Sorry, Harry. Arithmancy due tomorrow.' And without any more explanation, she was through the portrait hole, bag in hand, leaving Harry', mouth stumbling as he changed his question into a, "Bye, then. See you after Quidditch practice?'

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Hermione walked blindly through the halls, arriving at the great double-doors of the library by habit. But as she reached for the brass handle, she halted, brushed the cool metal with her fingers as if apologizing, and turned away, heading for the stairs that would take her to the side door and out onto the grounds.

Greenhouse Seven, labeled the student-run greenhouse, was kept unlocked, and students grew plants with low magical energy, most of which were familiar to Hermione from her childhood. She slipped inside, the warmth enveloping her pleasantly and she shed her cloak and the Halloween chill together as the glass door clicked gently shut. She kicked off her shoes to stand appreciatively in the grass that carpeted this greenhouse, and looked around, seeking her favorites.

The red-and-yellow tulips with ruffled edges grew on the far side of the enclosure, and she padded towards them, burying her nose in them. They were not a pungent flower, and dirt and water both overpowered their slight natural scent, but the smell of the mingled elements calmed her, made it easier to think, and consequently strengthened her Occlumency.

The Headmaster had been delighted on their first lesson to discover her neatly organized, self-compartmentalized mind, an ideal trait for a would-be Occlumens. It had taken only two lessons to bring her most

personal, delicate memories under lock-and-key, and she had built a mental fortress around her memories of Snape and the associated emotions.

She smiled painfully as she traced the stem and long leaves of a flower. She had been so worried, that first hour, that Dumbledore would witness their almost-kiss in the Burrow that past summer. But the Headmaster had been gentle, never prying farther than he needed to in order to make a point, and had stopped well shy of her most intimate encounters with her former Potion's Master.

He had stumbled across her memory of healing Snape in the entry of the Burrow before an Order meeting, and desire spiked through her again with his recalled touch. She had blushed furiously as Dumbledore had withdrawn, a pensive look on his face. It was the first and only time he had directly addressed the true issue at stake with her, and he had asked quietly, 'Professor Snape has made no further attempt to touch you, am I correct?'

Hermione had faltered, taken a deep breath and lied. 'Only when necessary, sir. Like at the Riddle House.'

'Indeed.' His reply had not indicated that he didn't believe her, but the look in his eye told her plainly that he did not think she was telling him the whole of it. She hadn't elaborated.

But what her two lessons thus far had not prepared her for was the totality of her exhaustion when she had used Occlumency all day. A fleeting smugness had flitted through the bond when she had felt his vague confusion at her sudden ability to lock herself away and his inability to access her, though she regretted blocking the tender advances he had been making over the past few days, trying to bolster her flagging metabolism and soothe her sleepless mind. And the constant effort of maintaining the barrier left her so tired, she wondered if the plan might backfire, and whether she might just need to leave England after all.

Bittersweet pain lanced through her at the thought of leaving everything, especially the lithe, dark-haired, saturnine wizard whom she had not seen in days, and Hermione buried her hands in the earth, the gentle magic of the tulips spiraling into her fingers.

He couldn't find her.

Ten days of stewing, bitterness and loss at war with desire and the desperate need to act, to show the Dark Lord that he had made his decision, or come up with an alternative- and now she had removed herself from his mind. It had been puzzling, earlier that day, to find that his wards guarded against nothing, that her emotions were not only masked but so shrouded that he barely felt her at all.

Not having her in class, purposefully avoiding eating early at breakfast, lunch and dinner- she was almost always there for the first half-hour of the meal- had not meant that he hadn't occasionally glimpsed her out of the corner of his eye, and his observant gaze had catalogued details of his bond mate's physical state that alarmed him. He had last seen her three days ago, paused in conversation with Professor Vector in one of the schools myriad corridors. The two witches had been talking animatedly, bathed in late afternoon sunlight from one of the vaulted windows lining the hall, and even in the healthy orange light, Hermione Granger had glowed with an incandescent, pearly and wholly sickly, shimmer. Only the threat of his own immediate, physical collapse had kept him from approaching her then, and he had tried feeding her gentle assurances since, encouraging her to eat and sleep, though his own appetite and restlessness were beginning to take their toll on the spy.

Before worry could overtake him and detour his iron-cast decision once more, he cast his mind out once more, actively seeking her for the first time since locking himself away, needing not just the spark of her existence but her exact location. His body hummed, as it had since the Riddle House, with awareness of her, of her existence in the castle...

But it was slightly fainter than before. He narrowed his eyes in concentration. She was outside.

Rising from his desk and snatching his ebony over-cloak in one unbroken motion, the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor strode out of his dungeon office, past the entrance to his serpents' lair, up



the stone stairs and out the side door that his quarry had passed through not ten minutes prior.

Once on the grass, he stopped, nostrils dilating as if trying to smell her out. Warm golden squares bounced on the cold snow from Hagrid's cabin and he started forward, hesitantly, knowing from previous flashes of memory that she and the two boys had a strangely close friendship with the half-giant. It occurred to him to be jealous of Hagrid for his easy, open access to the girl, and then he thrust that thought away. He could no more have an open friendship with any student than Hagrid could cast an Unforgivable.

Only three steps towards the cabin, his awareness of her decreased. He turned around, stood for a moment running through the possibilities of her location, started for the rose hedges. The hum continued to fade. He frowned. Not in Hagrid's cabin, not in the gardens and not in the castle. The girl would hardly be fool enough to venture into the Forbidden Forest without a good reason...

But he had no knowledge of her mind now. She might have found any number of things in the past day that would lead her there, she had little enough compunction about going when she imagined her friends needed her too. Panic fanned his heartbeat into gallops as he strode towards the forest. Her weakened state left her as easy prey to the many creature- sentient and non-sentient- that dwelt therein-

*-a blossom slowly lifting its head under the attentions of a watering can-*

Glass walls. The greenhouses. He stopped, eyelids fluttering closed for a moment of sheer relief, and his pace quickened as he whirled, rounded the corners of the castle, and approached the dozen tiny huts of glass huddled together, their vibrant green and glinting glass brilliantly out of place against the dead yellow-brown grass and twilight sky.

This was undoubtedly correct. She was there. His bones vibrated hopefully in his limbs, extending their excitement to his lean muscles and the shaky control that he had enforced in himself rigidly since the rescue a week and half prior peeled with the advancing tide. Words, speeches, the planned explanation, rational thought- vanished.

Magic replaced them, soaring through him, flushing his veins, rousing his blood, his final choice bringing the power of the bond to meld with his considerable natural magic, passion feeding his limbs. His head lightened, then his neck, tugging his spine upward, his legs loosening, feet lifting off the ground, forces uniting, cresting, settling him back to earth gently, wind rippling coolly though the bottom of his cloak, kissing his ankles.

Nervousness, fear, apprehension, guilt...disappeared. He knew what he wanted- unsullied, unqualified for the first time in years- and as his heels planted once more on the ground, he determined he would have it.

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She knew he was coming. She could feel both his presence and his decision in the snow-covered field just beyond the greenhouses, and she stilled, the surge of strength and completion flowing from his open mind, pouring into her, Occlumency abandoned in favor of the emotions shaping within her- a human-sized mold. She smiled, a brief interlude of peace to make her own choice and accept his-

-followed by the sandblast of passion, scrubbing her soul raw, throwing her intellect to the ether that whipped around him. She sunk her hands again into the dirt, seeking not the enfolding, soothing magic of the flowers but the ancient, life-moving power of Terra, the Mother who birthed all things. It surged up her legs from the grass, flooded her fingers from the potted earth. Beneath her, around her, *through* her, she felt the earth shift, warmth fusing her to the ground, steadying her heart. She breathed deeply, the sweetness of the air mixing with watered dirt to slow the adrenaline that tore through her blood.

The glass door flew open. Magic entered in a maelstrom. Wind reached her, snatched her with almost tangible hands and whirled her about to face her bond mate.

He was treading the soil, but only just. The gale blowing his robes and long hair forward threatened constantly to lift him, and she stared, enchanted, his body rimmed and glowing with interlocking threads of blue and gold.

Shimmering strands arced on the wind that had already found her, and snaps of brown and orange-red licked over her flesh to meet it, traveling up her toes, into her hips, making her womb burn, dancing over her ribs to her breasts, nipples hardening under the teasing caress of magic, up her throat, into her eyes, fire igniting, the calm of earth swept away by the cleansing element of flame.

Words had long since been transcended, and now even coherent thought was stripped away. Only longing, need and the magic existed, raw, unconsummated, throbbing. Hermione ached for something she had never experienced, and willingly stepped forward into the embrace of the tempest, the threads wrapping her body tugging her, eager to join their sisters tangled around him.

Snape stared at the witch, *his* witch, the nimbus of light pulsing around her like an aurora, her already delicate, translucent skin glowed of its own accord. But her eyes... large, dark and luminous, they held nothing but desire. For him.

Without any other touch, wind winding around them, Snape bent his head to the mouth of the slight witch who had occupied all of his thoughts for the last six, perilous months, gold, blue, red-orange and light brown spools of magic twining about them joyfully, suffusing them with radiance as his hands finally crushed her to him, tangled in unruly curls.

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Polite applause followed Dumbledore's speech in the Great Hall, the students eagerly awaiting the specialty foods that always marked Halloween. In his seat, markedly alone, sat Harry Potter, twisting towards the doors every few seconds, clearly hoping to see his friends walk in. Ginny sat across from him and arched an eyebrow as the food appeared.

'Where's Ron?' she asked.

'I was going to ask you. He hasn't been in the Common- Ron!'

Ron was in the doorway, with...*Lavender Brown*? Harry wondered. But there was no denying that the brown-haired witch following Ron

had tamed, straight layers instead of a mane and several inches on Harry's other best friend.

'Where's Hermione?' Harry demanded tersely as Ron flipped one long leg over the bench.

'Glad to see you too, mate,' Ron murmured. Lavender joined Parvati some seats down, and received a meaningful nudge and roll of the eyes in Ron's direction. Lavender shook her head slightly.

'Sorry. But have you seen her?'

'No. She's probably in the library,' Ron tried to reason. 'Lost track of the time. You know her.'

'Hmmm. Maybe.' And Harry continued to surreptitiously check the door, feet itching to satisfy his curiosity and find his friend.

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As Dumbledore reached for the final ingredient to complete his plate-mashed pumpkin- magic rippled up his spine, causing his withered hand to tingle painfully. He halted in the act of levitating the bowl from the far end of the table, and Vector barely managed to catch it as his concentration wavered.

A second gust of power swept the hall, and he noticed several of the other teachers frowning uncomfortably and shifting in their seats. Minerva visibly squirmed, glanced down the table. Dumbledore heard her soft gasp, and her fingers tightened around his arm.

'Albus...Severus,' she nodded to the only empty chair at the staff table.

The Headmaster's eyes instantly went to the Gryffindor table. *Let me be wrong, let it be something else, not that, not her, not now...* But Hermione Granger was not safely ensconced at the Gryffindor House table with her friends and peers.

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Hot glass under her bared back, her smooth thighs slipping with sweat from his hips, Hermione's back arched, head barely cushioned by her thick hair as it pushed against the wall of the greenhouse, moaning as Snape's tongue first slowly traced the full curve of her breast, tip then spiraling inward to brush the darker aureole until it finally flickered over the tight nipple. Her hands, buried in his dark hair, tightened spasmodically as he sucked, pulled and teased.

'My turn,' she panted as his mouth lifted for an instant, coming to meet hers.

'Your turn to do what?' he purred in her ear, lips grazing her neck.

*Anything you wish.* She slid down, her feet striking the ground and shedding the robes that had already been stripped from her chest and bunched around her waist. Fully naked, she kissed him once more, encouraging his tongue to join her sensual play.

The double arousal they had shared in the hospital wing weeks ago paled in comparison to the cascade that coursed through them now. Without awkward fumbling or guesswork, Hermione's body had told Snape exactly how and where she wanted to be touched, twisting to meet him, writhing guiding his long, supple fingers and ready tongue, the spikes of her desire ringing in his blood. Snape's body would do the same.

Feral magic raged unchecked in her trembling body, orange sparking at the ends of her fingers as they found the buckle to his belt and slid the silver out of its clasp. A hiss of pleasure, the straining of his still-clothed groin under her hand. She unbuttoned his pants, placed her palms inside, hooking her thumbs over the outside, and ran her hands down his body, divesting him of his garment in a single, luxurious sweep. Her hands drifted back upwards, caressing the lean, muscular calves and thighs of a fighter, the magic built in her body spiraling around the dark-haired legs to the thatch of black at their peak, tip-toeing along the hardened member, the whisper of magic added to the effort of her hands to map his body and it was his turn to dig his hands into her hair, pulling as he suppressed a groan.

Her hands finally completed their attentions to his legs, and joined the seething magic already teasing him, one hand running the length of

the shaft, the other applying pressure, magic stroking under his sac. Moisture began to bead at his tip, and the first drips her thumb swept off in exploration, but the next few were greeted by her tongue.

‘Hermione!’ His gasp sent a thrill down her spine, wind racing with it, lifting her hair, glittering gold adorning the two naked forms as her mouth found the rim of the head, delighting when he bucked into her, quivering.

The magic housed in him had also found their outlet, and while his hands remained fisted in her hair, glistening blue and gilt threads wound round her nipples, tickled her sides and plunged into the wet curls, gentle wisps bringing further damp, the smell of arousal soaking the humid air.

She withdrew as she tasted salt, refusing to let him finish without her. He sank to the grass in front of her, his kisses hard, he bore her to the ground. Terra consented, and Hermione’s hips thrust upward eagerly, seeking relief, brown cords of light finally fully joining their siblings at play, urging the couple onward, the raw, elemental magic millennia old rejoicing in the union that it had created.

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The magic peaked painfully in the Great Hall, so powerful that even some of the students shifted uncomfortably in their chairs, and subsided. Dumbledore breathed heavily as his damaged appendage throbbed angrily, his lungs loosening as the tide of magic receded.

‘Albus?’ The entire staff was staring at him curiously, as were some of the students. And as the younger ones took their cues from their older peers, more faces were turning in his direction, awaiting the explanation that he had always been able to provide.

He did not fail them now. ‘A little ward-testing, by the curse-breakers of Gringotts,’ he lied, his voice rock-steady as he stood. ‘Nothing to worry about- though I apologize for the discomfort. We placed some new wards this summer, and they’re trying them out for weaknesses.’ He sat, and the students resumed their babble, though now it was about what new wards could have been added and whether that would severely interfere with Hogsmeade weekends.

'New wards, Albus? I wasn't aware of them,' Slughorn sipped his wine. The rest of the staff were also regarding him with slightly injured, slightly surprised stares.

'The fewer who know the weaknesses and strengths of the castle, the better,' he replied calmly. 'I can assure you they will not interfere with any of the magic taught here, or the activities that students and staff normally engage in.' He sipped his pumpkin juice, winced as the power spiked again slightly. 'Now, if you will excuse me, I think I will go ensure that our curse-breakers haven't found a way to exploit or get around the new defenses.'

McGonagall heard her cue in the lie, and rose with her husband, nodding absently to Pomona Sprout, who would be in charge of the hall with McGonagall, Snape and Dumbledore absent.

As they left the hall, Dumbledore hesitated, as if waiting for instruction. McGonagall touched his back gently.

'There was nothing you could do, Albus. Nothing they could do. It was driving them both mad.'

'I know,' he whispered miserably, and she saw tears swimming in the blue eyes she had loved for more than fifty years. 'But what can they- and I- do now, Minerva? It is forbidden for staff to touch students.'

*And Hermione...Hermione will hate him. And loathe herself. How can I let her do that? How can I let her go forward with this now, when in a few months time...*

Husband and wife slid their arms around each other, deaf to the general merriment and noise in the hall behind them, sorrow and worry for the couple in the greenhouse deepening the well-worn grooves in their features.

## Aftermath

Water poured over her, dousing the fire that seemed permanently kindled in her veins. Hands still shaking, she reached for the soap, hesitating as she touched the slippery bar, her fingers sliding over and around it as she palmed it, reluctant to wash away the traces of his smell, and the smell of them. But suds gushed over her hands, and she gently began to soap herself, her body sore and ecstatic at the same time, touch of any kind almost over-stimulating- but she could not appear before anyone with his scent coating her.

She had to admit that she was less worried about either Harry or Ron noticing than the far more experienced Ginny. She winced at the idea of enduring the youngest Weasley's probing eyes and questions and scrubbed the place between her breasts a little harder, the memory of his mouth pressing kisses translating to delicious shivers spiking down her spine.

Her hand blindly found the tap, turning off the water as the last of the slick soap streamed from her breasts and hair and groped for her towel, relishing the sudden warmth of wrapping herself in the thick cloth after stepping into the cold air, her legs pricking with goosebumps.

A peculiar lightness suffused her body, accompanied by a sharp longing for Snape. She shook her head, unable to dispel the feeling, the excitement it brought her and the unreasoned, complete joy. She hugged her towel around her, happiness bursting onto her face in a wide smile.

*Snape ran one long hand down her body, gently moving over all the curves, explored and unexplored in their love-making. The after-effects of the elements still flared exhaustedly at their hips, from finger-, fire made its last jump from the tip of her small nose to the end of his hooked one and he smiled lazily. His other arm nestled under her head, and he drew her closer to him. She buried her face in his chest, the sparse hair there coarse on her cheek.*

*They did not speak, but thought had once again replaced instinct and through their bond of mind and touch, she asked, What will we do?*



The same we have always done, *came his silent reply. Her hand tightened around his side, as if she could keep him close to her always by holding him now.*

The same we have always done. *He smoothed her hair with his other hand, tangling it in the mane that he had not dared to caress before and let fascinate him now, picking through individual curls and snarls, teasing them apart patiently, feeling her contented calm connected to his soothing hands.*

*The greenhouse was locked, the windows blacked by a command of magic, and Hermione relished the heat of the earth beneath her, the grass poking her back as she curved her small body against her lover's harder, leaner, longer one.*

*'It's time.'* *They were the only words he had spoken aloud, and she did not argue. Slowly, she sat up and away from him, her right side instantly protesting the loss of warmth and the texture of his skin.*

*You are so beautiful. The thought was spontaneous and completely honest, his sincerity and his wonder almost tangible as his black eyes drank her in, appreciation glistening in them. He leaned forward and kissed her softly, gave her his small smile and rose.*

He had said nothing else, had left the greenhouse twenty minutes before she did, allowing her to dismantle the privacy wards he had so hastily thrown up. She had dressed shakily, elation surging through her- followed by its slower, insidious cousin, desolation. In this, she was completely alone. Her mother, her Head of House, her best friends...none of them could advise her.

Fear swallowed her almost as quickly as joy had, and tears blurred her vision as she clutched her towel tighter for comfort. She shook herself irritably. She had not expected roses and fancy dinners. Sleeping with a professor was generally grounds for expulsion, and the consequences were much worse for him.

She allowed the towel to drop to the floor, shedding with it her fluctuating emotions. As she dressed in fresh clothes- her previous garb had been instantly sent to the house-elves- her face smoothed

over. While she could not lie to Harry and Ron directly about most things, misguiding their perceptions was altogether different.

And she had been at the library before dinner. For perhaps all of five seconds, but she had been there.

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Snape touched his mouth again, leaning against the black-shot marble that rimmed his shower on three sides. He could still feel her, as he dragged his fingers from his groin to his throat, her mouth pressing kisses where his callused hands now touched, delighted with his body, with the reaction of his lean muscles to her ministrations. He had never seen such ardent, unadulterated pleasure in the eyes of a woman before- and certainly not directed towards him.

Guilt assailed him, and, finally unable to hold it at bay, he let it consume him, as he had to when these fits came. His knuckles whitened as clenched fingers bit crescent scars into the palms of his hands, water beating on him unheeded from the showerhead, teeth gritted and pained. If she knew what he was keeping from her...Dumbledore, Voldemort's orders...she thought he hadn't noticed her surreptitiously cast contraception charm as she dressed. He knew how to counter the spell...and eventually he would have to. Remorse tore at his gut, shortening his breath.

*I love her, he thought bleakly, the weight of his emotion strangling him. And I must betray her. Twice.*

888

Harry Potter stood in the shadow of a staircase outside the Great Hall, the faint sounds of full students heading to their common rooms going completely ignored until they were silenced, his face drawn and eyes narrowed in a body completely still, looking more like his father's childhood enemy than any of the Marauders would have imagined. Dark hair, dark robes, incisive eyes.

He had left the Great Hall driven by a need, he thought, to find Hermione. His absent professor had also not gone unnoticed by jade

eyes, and alarm rang so furiously in him that he had to move. But his restlessness vanished as he met the darkened entrance chamber with its myriad staircases and steady torches, escaping from the heat of the hall into the cold stone corridor, where he ensconced himself in a corner, leaning against the wall. Muddled thoughts trickled through his mind. Malfoy. Voldemort. Snape. Hermione. The school wards and the testers tonight.

If Dumbledore had wizards taxing the wards, he expected an assault on the school. The defenses had done something, and the older students had felt it, fear rippling through them as guesses and rumors overtook the Headmaster's statement. His short return, declaring the situation safe and hurriedly eating dinner before vanishing once more with Professor McGonagall had done nothing to quell the talk as the students had quit the hall, filing past Harry, whispers intensifying even as their footfalls accented them, percussing on the stairs.

Harry personally could think of no better place to stage a battle. Let the Death Eaters attack from the outside- Hogwarts was a castle, defended by magic and granite, and a siege would prove difficult. Perhaps impossible.

Except for the students. Too many unprepared first and second years.

And inside the walls were traitors, students of all Houses with parents marching in the ranks assembled by the Dark Lord, and loyalties were tangled, inextricable from family and friends. Harry shivered in the shade of the winding wall fire and another thought replaced the musings of war.

His friends grew fewer, his own, informal Inner Circle weakening. Ron was intrigued by Lavender, Hermione entranced by her secrets and her work. And Ginny...the red-haired, passionate witch brought a lump to his throat whenever he saw her. Flying, talking and waving her hands animatedly in true Weasley fashion, her throat rumbling with laughter, curled up next to him in the common room, her eyelashes casting thin black lines on her cheeks as she slept...

But over her always, he could see the specter of Tom Riddle. Riddle the boy, her body nearly drained of life to support the memory of Lord

Voldemort. It flashed in his mind's eye every time he touched her, put his arms around her, poisoning every thought...

War occupied him again. The Dark Lord grew ever stronger, strong enough to get Lucius Malfoy released from Azkaban, strong enough to send the son into the school to complete some mission. Strong enough yet weak enough that Dumbledore would not take Harry seriously, would not take the threat that Malfoy presented seriously...

Harry's mouth twisted. He had survived Voldemort more times than most wizards who had faced the Lord. At eleven years old he had gained the Philosopher's Stone from the Mirror of Erised under the Dark Lord's nose, and ended every year since in violence. Dumbledore was honing him into a weapon, a well-informed, well-tuned instrument. When would the headmaster realize that if he could do it to Harry, Voldemort could do it to Malfoy? That Voldemort had no scruples about using students any and every way he could to gain advantage in Dumbledore's territory...

The cold, white face of first-year Ginny lying on a stone slab intruded on his vision, doubled with the transparent, fading features of his best friend of now. Hermione and Ginny carried him and Ron. Hermione always had. Ginny had demonstrated her readiness to join them in the Department of Mysteries. Whatever Malfoy had in mind, whatever Voldemort ordered him to do, it could only hurt all of them. He had to know. It had to be stopped. Dumbledore trusted Snape, but there had been something indefinable in the eyes of the spy that had unsettled Harry deeply that night in the hospital wing, watching Snape stand over his best friend. He could not place his life in the hands of his Defense Professor.

He pushed away from the wall, his rapid strides causing his school robe to billow out behind him, from the back a shorter, younger image of the professor he despised, he hurried towards his common room, where Ron would be waiting.

888

Ron watched Harry rise abruptly, his best friend swinging a long leg over the bench and starting for the door without so much as a word. Almost automatically, Ron rose himself, ready to follow, when his

sister's small hand on his wrist stopped him, shaking her head very slightly from side to side.

Growing up with six not-so-evenly tempered brothers in the cramped quarters of the Burrow had refined Ginny's senses of moods. And the sudden, silent departure of Harry Potter spoke of a dark one.

'Where's he going?' Ron could not hide the stab of pain he felt. He had been pleased to watch his best friend gradually growing closer to his favorite sibling, but Harry telling Ginny things that he hadn't shared with Ron hadn't been part of Ron's mental painting. His sister smiled, anticipating him and instantly soothing it.

'I don't know, Ron. He hasn't told me anything, either.'

Ron slowly sank down, picking over his food, appetite quite suppressed as his peas squished into leftover treacle, speared moodily on his fork.

Ginny gave her brother a sympathetic look, her fingers nudging his until his blue eyes locked with hers again.

'Don't worry. He'll be all right.'

'I don't know.' Ron replied worriedly, and his voice betrayed so much exhaustion that Neville, two seats down, broke off his discussion of Dractitntilla Vine with a fifth year and turned around. 'The last fight...'

'Ron?' Neville's gentle concern broke into the connection between brother and sister. What-'

'Nothing.' Neville's steady, skeptical gaze prompted a more honest reply. 'Harry,' Ron admitted, voice deliberately lower.

'He went through hell at the Riddle House,' Neville said quietly, and Ginny looked at him sharply. There was something all together too sadly wise about this boy. 'There's something...vicious...about facing a person who hurt your parents.' His mouth twisted, and there was no humor to it. 'Remember that he lost Sirius in the battle before this one. He worries about you,' he told Ron. 'And even more about you.' This

last was to Ginny, and she dropped her eyes briefly before tilting her chin up.

‘He doesn’t need to.’

‘He does. It’s in his nightmares. Sometimes, when I can’t sleep, I hear him talk about all of you, and Sirius...and occasionally, though not often now, Cedric Diggory.’

Ron shoved his plate away. ‘I’m not hungry anymore. Does anyone want to go upstairs?’

Ginny and Neville stood with him, and much to his surprise, his eye caught Lavender standing next to a startled Parvati, and as the four made their way out of the Great Hall, her fingers slid into his hand, squeezing for comfort. He squeezed back gently as they started up the stairs in silence.

888

Minerva watched her husband pace in front of the fire of his office, blue eyes devoid of emotion, injured hand still twitching with the magical backlash of Snape and Hermione’s union.

‘Are you going to write to the Wizengamot?’ she asked blandly, knowing full well his reply.

He leveled a cold look at her over his spectacles. ‘Pray do not ask questions to which you already know the answer, Minerva. Of course I’m not going to write to the Wizengamot. My best spy is of no use to us in Azkaban.’ *Fine words*, he thought wryly, remembering his conversation with his Defense professor over the summer. ‘*Believe me, I am in no way advocating that you so much as touch her, Severus, and indeed, I must confess that I would likely have to fire you if I ever find out you have.*’ An empty threat, now that it had come to that. Dumbledore could not fire him, could not even open his mouth, no matter what he knew...

His wife inclined her head slowly, and asked gently, ‘Then what are you going to do?’

A frustrated sigh blew past his thin lips. 'Ignore it, I suppose. If I'm not going to inform the court, I see little alternative to keeping silent.'

Her thinning eyebrows rose. 'Albus...' she hesitated, and forced herself to say it. It was the truth, and her husband could not hide from that, no matter his love for their dark-leaning adopted son and her Gryffindor lioness. 'The bond will not be satisfied until Hermione bears him a child. You will allow them to continue this...beyond inappropriate behavior- in Hogwarts- until *that* requirement is met?'

Dumbledore's gut clenched. They would never get that chance- Hermione would doubtless employ contraceptive charms, and long before she could think of bearing children her lover would be in exile...

'You do not intend for it to get that far. Albus-' His wife was standing in a smooth sheen of tartan satin, her hand on his arm. 'Albus, what do you know? What aren't you telling me?'

The eyes that turned on her were haunted, desolate, lost. A man steeling himself to something he ardently dreaded- but nevertheless knew he had to do. Her mouth dried, her breath catching as silence stretched between them. 'Albus...' It was a whisper.

Fear ghosted across her heart, foreboding deepening as he shook his head and freed his arm, crossing to his desk and seating himself. Uncertainty and pain were hidden beneath the unruffled serenity of the general once more.

He began to shuffle papers on his desk, reaching for his quill. 'You will know in time, Minerva.'

Never had the collected, measured voice of her husband reassured her less.

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'Harry.' Ron's voice would have sounded wary, had Harry stopped to think about it, but instead he sank into the armchair directly across from brother and sister and locked his eyes onto Ron's, heedless of anything other than his suddenly-urgent goal.

'We have to find out what Malfoy's up to.'

'Up to? What? Harry- Malfoy was at the feast. Like everyone else.'

'Not like everyone else. Snape wasn't there.'

'Neither was Hermione,' Ron replied pointedly, cold seeping in. His worry for his green-gazed friend submerged in a slow-burning anger. Malfoy. This year it was always someone. Malfoy. Snape. Dumbledore. Broodiness had altered with periods of normalcy, a sixteen-year-old persona married to a much older one, since Sirius' death and Hermione's near-death the last spring. In these moods, Harry had obsessed furiously about Snape over the summer and before his capture. Now his mood had shifted to Malfoy.

And the Riddle House battle had made it, if anything, much worse.

'Hermione? She was doubtless in the library.' Ron's fury rose to simmering, his back teeth grinding at Harry's instant dismissal of the third member of their triad. He, too, had thought her in the library. But a cursory check on the way back to the common room had revealed her favorite dark corners and dust-covered volumes undeniably alone, and the red-head's worry for his friend had climbed.

'What about Malfoy?' Ginny asked.

'I have to know what he's doing.'

'We don't know if he's doing anything, mate,' Ron said, his oddly muted voice a testament to his attempts to contain his anger, shooting his sister a disappointed glance- Ginny should be helping *him*, not assisting Harry in constructing his demons. 'He might not be doing anything at all.'

'He's a Death Eater. He's taken the Mark. I know it,' Harry shot back. They attracted the curious looks of half a dozen studiers in the area, and Harry glowered at them, encouraging them to return to meticulously scouring their books.



Ginny looked down at her brother from her perch on the side of his armchair, and swung her head to meet the determined, angry, obsessive eyes of the boy she had loved for five years.

‘What is it you have in mind, Harry?’

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For the first time since the battle, Hermione entered the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. Wanting flared eagerly- but controlled. Her gait was steady, in spite of her heart’s rapid pace, the searing of her adrenaline-packed stomach present, but tamed.

She took her desk between the boys. Slytherins nudged each other, Pansy gently poking Draco in the back and jerking her head over her shoulder. The platinum-blond’s hair swung out of his eyes as he turned his head to observe his academic rival- pale as ever, but with a different, healthy stiffening of her spine and alert, attentive eyes. Hermione Granger was back in Defense Against the Dark Arts after a week and a half absence. Interesting.

As Snape turned from the blackboard where he was writing up notes on their next series of defensive spells, his eyes passed over her and Malfoy’s gaze sharpened. His professor, too, seemed less fallow than he had been since the Riddle House, and the honed vindictiveness in his black eyes practically glittered with a life lacking for the past week. Interesting.

‘Miss Granger. Since you have been so good as to re-join us,’ Snape’s voice hissed over her, slithering down her back like the individual, deliberate touch of his fingers, and she felt fire sweep to life at the base of her spine. ‘Perhaps you would like to demonstrate this particular form of defense against animals with plated or scaled bodies?’ His wand rapped the blackboard containing the details of the incantation.

Meeting his black eyes without fear fanned flame and earth in her veins and she stood, her voice exactly, almost offensively, correct as she replied. ‘Of course, Professor.’

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*My desk. Now.*

The mental command froze her hands as she was sliding her book back into her bag. She closed her eyes, searching for the elements of fire and earth that were her half of their bond, seeking reassurance from the familiar caress...

They had both withstood the hour-and-a-half double period, but it had not been without effort. A third of the way through the afternoon, Hermione felt the pressure of her desire spilling over as her gaze automatically sought and found her new lover, and an insistent ache took up residence in her womb. She had hurriedly focused on the rudimentary, but effective, Occlumency she had learned, keeping her mind closed, but his physical nearness was wearing her down. She noticed that he deliberately kept himself as far away from her, and her partner, as possible during class...but now that it was over...

'I have a question to ask,' she lied as she started towards the front.

'We'll wait.' Harry replied firmly. 'In here.' Hermione stared at him.

'Harry- I'll be all right.'

'I don't trust him, Hermione-'

'Harry, she'll be fine,' Ron interrupted. His hand locked around Harry's wrist and his blue eyes met Hermione's. 'We'll be outside.'

'Potter, Weasley, Granger. I expect you have something better to do than fill my ears with your childish prattle?'

'I wanted to ask you something, sir,' Hermione walked into the role he had just created for her. With a sigh and a sneer, he fulfilled his part.

'Then ask, Granger'

The door closed on the boys as she stood nervously before his desk, all of her considerable force of mind turned to keeping her wayward body completely under control.

Snape's hand reached up from where he was sitting to trace her jaw line, shaking slightly, and at contact they both gasped. Their touch heated and soothed at the same time, the exchange of elements flowing into and through their partners. She tilted her head to his hand, encouraging him to continue.

*Tonight?* The question went purposefully unspoken. He did not trust Harry and Ron not to stand with their ears pressed to the door, and neither did she. Her nod into his palm was her acquiescence. *After curfew. You MUST be in the Common Room with your friends late.*

The flood of understanding he received assured him that she needed no extra explanation. She twisted so that her mouth brushed his fingers as she turned away from him and walked out of the room.

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In the hall, Hermione walked into a low-voiced but nevertheless heated argument between Harry and Ron, and blinked as her appearance brought no response from either. Guilt assailed her. How much had she missed in the last six months, her fascination with Snape eclipsing her friends, making her blind?

'I don't see any reason to trust Snape any more than I do Malfoy.'

'Because he's working for the *Order*, Harry! He saved us last year in the Department of Mysteries. *He* sent the rescue party.' Hermione cracked a smile. Ron had been told that very thing at an Order meeting not more than a month ago. But true to Ron style, he had taken his rebuke to heart and was working to amend his error, though Snape would likely never know it.

'He's a double agent! He's always been a spy-'

'Gentlemen.' The word was more civil, but the flat, icy tone was Snape to the life as Hermione interrupted them. 'You two yelling at each other is attracting an audience.' And indeed, once more students had clustered curiously to watch the confrontation.

Awkward silence replaced heated discussion and Hermione looped an arm through each boy's crossed arms, resemblance to her

bondmate vanishing. 'Come on. We can talk about this elsewhere.' As they strode back towards the Common Room, Hermione winced at the tightness of Harry's muscles, betraying his anger and his impatience. Next to her Ron was relaxed, bewildered, but relaxed, completely at odds with Harry's explosive tension.

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Her awareness of him increasing with every drawn breath, Hermione hurried down to the dungeons. It never occurred to her to wonder where she might find him- she just *knew*, knew he was still in the office he'd always had as a Potions Master and hadn't moved from when he had become the Defense teacher.

Her feet traveled the well-worn path to the dungeon primarily used for Potions, and through the to the double doors that sealed Snape's office. Her hands shook as she touched the knob. She had only been in here once before, and her fingers had been unsteady then too- stealing the boomslang skin from his private cupboard. She halted, withdrew her wand and murmured a spell. She could feel her body rebel, fire snapping at her hips, flaring visibly. The elements didn't want a contraceptive charm. The bond was, after all, to impregnate her. *Not now*, she told the fire that seemed to rebuke her. *Maybe later. Much later.*

'Come, Granger, you aren't a thief this time, entering unwanted or uninvited.' There was humor in those dark eyes as he opened the door for her. Work was scattered across his desk, quill still coated with glistening ink as if she had interrupted him- but she could feel his impatience, and knew that he had not been working any more than she had tonight.

She closed the door behind her, catching her bottom lip in her teeth, shy uncertainty tingeing her boldness. His long fingers brushed her temples, dragging down her face. Wind rustled her hair, adding its murmur, whispering across the back of her neck in fluttering kisses. The elements seemed to have grown more insistent, not less as he leaned down to kiss her, and inflamed her instantly. Her fingers found the row of buttons going straight up his body and she ran it down,

using magic to separate button from hole and shed his outer garment almost immediately.

‘Where did you learn that?’ he asked, and she could feel his amusement. ‘If you tell me a book...’

She laughed, and was surprised by the sound. It was not the quiet, high-pitched laugh of her childhood but low in her throat and somehow much richer. ‘No. I didn’t learn it. I just...knew it.’ And she had. Elemental magic teemed at the ends of her limbs, aching for use, eager to touch, guiding her actions.

He quickly divested her of her robe as well, leaving her in only her underwear. As his tongue flicked into the hollow at the base of her throat and began to trace a pattern downwards, running over her breasts at the curve of her bra, he lifted her and set her on the edge of his desk, capable hands finding the clasp and smoothly removing it, mouth never ceasing its attentions.

Her hands ran down his long, bare torso, terra and flame racing in advance of her nimble fingers, brushing over the long-faded scars and newer, still rigid ones as she sought the lower part of his body and his already erect cock, one hand finding the perineum and the other pulling in long strokes, relishing the shortening of his breath and the vigorous attention he paid to her now-hard nipple.

One hand rid her of her panties as he pushed against her, letting her guide him into her, sitting on his desk. He lifted his head to kiss her as he entered- and she was glowing. Her body was completely limned by the forces of their bonding, an aurora pouring light. He could see awe reflected in her eyes, and when he glanced down at himself, he could see his own body covered with patterns of fire, water, wind and earth. He moved, pushing into her as fully as he could, encouraged by her gasp of delight, and hissing himself with pleasure as he *felt* her.

As if it were a practiced maneuver, he pushed her back on the desk, sending his ink well over the edge to clunk on the ground and seep black into the cracked mortar as he rolled on top of her, the movement continuing into rhythm, Hermione arching under him as his mouth found her breasts once more.

*Hard. Cold. Detached.* The double-sensed orgasm engulfed both of them, melding their minds perfectly- and Snape immediately withdrew as it ceased, casting a cleaning charm on himself and stepping back into his trousers. He deliberately kept his back to Hermione as he buckled his belt, pulling his shirt on to cover himself, feeling her faint wondering advance to confusion and hurt as she could not touch his mind.

Hermione wandlessly summoned her robe, wrapping it around herself for protection as she sat up on the desk. Her professor was dressed again, every inch the man she knew in class, none of her lover left in his mind or gaze when he faced her again.

‘Snape...’ she hesitated, feeling far more naked now than she had five minutes ago wriggling under him. She was sweaty and hot, and the beginnings of cold were creeping into her gut.

‘Yes, Granger?’ They did not yet say first names. Hermione wasn’t sure if they ever would. His impassioned, ‘Hermione!’ last night had been the first and only time he had ever called her by her given name. And the aloofness of his manner now wiped out her vaunted Gryffindor bravery.

‘Nothing. I will see you Wednesday in class.’ She would never call him ‘sir’ or ‘professor’ in this setting. It would profane it. Though, perhaps it had already been profaned. But begging or asking questions was out of the question. She could feel the blankness of his mind, the absolutely stark gulf. She gathered her clothing, cast her own cleaning charm and left, sickness fomenting in her stomach.

She slumped in the hallway, barely breathing and shaking, feeling like she was going to vomit. She had never felt more like an object in her life- used briefly and then cast aside. Tears trickled in from the corners of her eyes, and her hand covered her mouth as if it could hold in the contents of her stomach.

Self-disgust took their place amongst her emotions.

She already wanted him again.

Snape could feel her distress, his own stomach roiling. He stood, staring blindly after her. No choice. She was going to hate him anyway. He couldn't make it harder on her than it already would be. This way would be easier. Her loathing would be real, Voldemort's glimpses of his actions untarnished by love, driven by the bond...

...the delight in her eyes when she had heard the thought, his sincere, *You are so beautiful...*

Water silently dripped, sparkling with elemental magic, to splash on the stones of his office floor, salt diluting the ink continuing to seep outwards.

## Borrowed Power, Borrowed Time

Hermione gritted her teeth as her wrist seared again, her feet moving faster as she made her way to his office. Where Snape slept she didn't know, she would simply have to pray that he returned to his place of work.

Halfway to the dungeons, she felt him disappear, growing so faint as to almost be completely gone at the back of her mind, and the sharp pain in her arm receded to a dull throb. She checked it anxiously. He had not been summoned since their consummation...

She felt sick to her stomach and halted that line of thinking as she peered at her skin, grateful that increased awareness of mind was not echoed in the body. Her alabaster skin remained as unbroken and pale as ever.

She had not spoken to him for three days, since the utterly uncaring aftermath of their shag in his office. Desire waged war with disgust, and so far disgust was winning. The idea of touching him made her both excited and ill, but she could not stay away now. He was going to see the Dark Lord, and she had to be there if he was safe or hurt when he returned, regardless of his last dismissal.

She went through the classroom door. Fire and earth shattered the wards around his office doors wordlessly and without thought, and she was sitting in his large chair, deliberately facing the fireplace and away from the scene of their previous encounter. She pulled an Arithmancy book out of her bag and began reading, her eyes flickering regularly to the gaping dark under the mantle.

After fifteen minutes of little reading and much perusal of the stone, she surged out of his chair, through the doors of his office and three dungeons down. She had not been in the lab for over six months, since her last detention, but her need to see it, to smell it, reinforced her steps. The lock responded to her elemental magic, as his office wards had done, and peeled away without effort.

She opened the door, slipping inside and inhaling gratefully, memories of months ago assaulting her. Multi-colored fires glittered at her merrily, unaware that their brewer was in potential danger, and



she approached each cauldron in imitation of him, smelling every solution as if greeting old friends.

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Snape swore softly as he Apparated into his master's house. His mind rioted with disorganization and dangerous thoughts. His grief over Hermione had gained greater hold in the last few days, not less, in spite of his knowledge that he could do nothing else, that this was the best way to spare her later. If she were to hate him, let it be now...not a burst of shock at the time of Dumbledore's death...

He breathed deeply, forcing his mind into the neat, closed compartments he had created so many years ago, and wrenched open the side door.

Up the servants' stairs, up into the dark hallways that Harry Potter had escaped from a bare two weeks ago, along the corridor to his master's meeting room-

-Snape stepped out of the dilapidated ruin into a room of unsurpassed splendor. A crystal chandelier glittered brightly, throwing patterns of rainbows across the deep cherry-stained table and re-finished hardwood floors, light invading corners, forcing shadow into the hall. Plush armchairs covered in green, grey and black velveteen loosely circled the fire where Nagini lay curled on a brand-new rug that, unless Snape was much mistaken, was woven from seaweed silk by the mermaids of the Pacific Ocean. He arched an eyebrow. He had not been in this re-decorated room before- and if the reactions of his compatriots, arriving just before and after he did, were a meter to judge by- neither had they.

'Sit, Severus,' Voldemort invited, bloodless lips curling in a grin, one long-fingered hand waving elegantly in the direction of chairs near the hearth. Snape bowed and obeyed, choosing a seat that allowed him a good view of Lucius Malfoy, but at a decent distance.

'I don't think you have permitted me in here before, my Lord,' Snape tested carefully, one eye checking his fellow Death Eater. Had Lucius been allowed in?

'No one has. It was a little practice to get my hand back in,' his master tossed back carelessly. 'It seems that without proper accoutrement, my *faithful* Death Eaters lack the discipline to follow my orders.'

Snape winced. Voldemort did not destroy things in rages- unless it was lives- he created. Using magic to create siphoned his anger usefully- the more beautiful the outcome, the more fury had been poured into it. His elemental magic rustled uncomfortably, heightening his sensitivity to intense emotion. Residual anger seethed in the room, and he shifted in his armchair, the livid shaping of the grey velveteen seeping into him, aware of the still-cold fury of his lord.

Voldemort's nostrils dilated as if smelling a peculiar, fascinating scent, and the lord swung his head to and fro several times before his vivid red eyes settled again on his spy.

'Magic. I smell new magic about you, Severus.' He circled the chair slowly. Snape forced himself to relax as his lord completed his circuit. 'Fascinating. One half of the whole. Aqua and Ether. Shall I assume the girl inherited Terra and Flame?'

Snape blinked slowly, as if surprised. 'If I carry only water and wind, then yes, I would assume she possesses earth and fire.'

'You don't know?' The Dark Lord raised his non-existent eyebrows.

'I don't,' Snape lied. 'I thought...when we...when I've bedded her,' he decided on the least-crass option available, 'the four surrounded us completely. I had not thought to carry residual only from two.'

'Interesting.' Red eyes met black. Without asking or even notifying, he was in his servant's mind.

Snape was re-living their first coupling in the greenhouse. He was grateful that his lord skipped most of the actual shag to reach the reaction. It took all of Snape's considerable control not to wince as his lord slowly examined the tender exchange that took place afterward, and the genuine pleasure of pleasing her...

...Voldemort continued to the next night's episode, an event that Snape had thoroughly divorced himself from mentally. Once again, the Dark Lord skimmed Hermione's writhing on his desk under him and reached the awkward, cold ending. Snape's emotions were utterly flat, uncaring radiating from the memory of her stricken face as she left his office. Voldemort received the intended impression and withdrew, a cruel smile touching his face.

'Admirable. Your first...encounter...worried me. But it seems you have whatever stray emotional aspects that might impact you well in hand. I am impressed, Severus.'

'Thank you, my Lord. The first session was...peculiar. The bond is intended to create an emotional impact as well as a physical one. But it is simply a matter of the mind. I know I need not feel anything for her.'

'Indeed. There are some incapable of handling such orders as I give them. I am pleased to know that I have at least *one* able and willing servant.'

Approval undercut anger, and Snape leaned back in his chair. He would come back from this meeting whole and unhurt. 'To disobey you is to court death, my Lord. I am no fool.'

A lipless smile fleetingly graced the lord's features, and then he was rising and gliding like the serpents he admired to stand in front of the fire, waiting for the uncomfortable silence to settle into wary expectance.

The stillness congealed, shivering. Black, grey, brown, cold blue and ice-green eyes locked on the slotted red that studied each one in turn. Snape did not have to turn in his chair to know that there were only a dozen assembled. The Circle of Pure-Bloods, Voldemort's commanders, in which the only half-bloods were himself and the Dark Lord.

'Lucius. Augustus. Claudius. Severus. Walden. Antonin. Bellatrix. Matthew. Gloria. Hadrian. Josephine.' Voldemort's eyes slid over each of them, and the Death Eaters, sitting and standing,

straightened their spines. It was the only place that Voldemort would use every name, with those bound to him by the dark.

Rustling indicated what they had all noticed. The last of the circle was not present. Peter Pettigrew's name had not been pronounced. Voldemort waited as the shuffling and darted glances ceased, knowing his audience, their unease increasing with the passing seconds.

'You will recall the disaster that has deprived me once again of my prize,' he continued smoothly when tension had peaked. 'Harry Potter is the final key to my immortality. I am able and willing to kill him. All I asked of you and your soldiers was to hold him. Here. In this house. One of the most highly warded, secure locations in the whole of Britain.'

'I have found, to my disappointment, that I cannot trust the lot of you to do even that,' he hissed. 'You once again could not keep my prize until the appointed day.' His eyes fastened on Claudius Avery. "But my Lord," he mimicked cruelly, "Can we not just kill the boy and perform the ceremony now?" You fail to understand, Claudius, Lucius, Antonin, that the magic binding life and death, emotion and elements, is not the series of tedious killing curses and *crucios* you perform every day. There is a time and a place for everything, and in old magic, time is determined by the tides, the phases of the moon and the flares of the sun. The only thing I needed of you- all of you, you who are supposedly my most loyal, my best generals- was to keep the boy still until the magic could be performed. Hold him in my keeping and leave his disposal to me.'

'I do not expect that the attack of a half-dozen children and a few Order members should cause you such disarray!' The last statement cracked in the room. From where he was, Snape could see Lucius Malfoy, patrician features cold and sculptural, absolutely still. He contained his smirk. Perhaps their lord would allow Snape the satisfaction of his revenge tonight...

'You are my Pure-Bloods. A group of jumped-up Mudbloods and blood-traitors are beneath you!' Matthew Gambit shrank from the

furious gaze as it turned on him. 'Some of you are masters of dueling. You have all taken part in our battles and purges for a new world.'

'Your incompetence disgusts me. I have one servant- *one*- who has continually done as I have asked, who is intelligent enough to make plans and execute them on their own and who lives in constant danger.' Snape could see Bellatrix, the only other Death Eater in the room not cringing, preening herself in anticipation-

'Severus manages to report on Dumbledore while working for him, carry out my orders, and bring me new plans. He is competent and obedient. One in twelve is not good enough.'

Snape could feel the furious glares in his back, could see the loathing in the eyes of his one-time friend, long-time rival, Lucius Malfoy. He crossed his legs comfortably, purposefully ignoring Bellatrix and gave every sign of simply enjoying the show.

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Hermione halted over a potion she recognized. It wasn't one she had directly worked on, but the smell, that unique combination of wormwort and cinnamon, returned her to the year before-

*'This one is a Clarity Drought,' Snape said, modulating the flame from bright red to a steady yellow.*

*'Sir, doesn't Madam Pomfrey stock that?'*

*'She does. The potion in this cauldron is an attempt to make one that works instantly. I am having little luck with it.'*

*'For battle situations?' Hermione hazarded a guess. The startled look on his face told her that she was correct- and that he had not expected her to think of it.*

*'Yes, actually. If we can keep Potter from throwing himself into the greatest possible danger without thinking every time the Dark Lord crooks his little finger, then it will be well worth the effort expended.'*

*Hermione blinked. She had never doubted this man, could not doubt him now that she hung on his every word, savoring the sound of his voice washing through her ears...but it was comforting to hear him speak of Harry with the clear intent of helping him. Everything had always been veiled before-*

-Hermione blinked away the tears stinging her eyes. The potion smelled the same, but its gentle pink color had become a rich navy blue with the addition of some ingredient and she stepped backwards, away from the smell and its attendant thoughts, familiar fear and pain gnawing their way through her gut.

She couldn't have explained why she was there at ten past midnight, well out-of-bounds and trailing disturbed wards in her wake. Their encounter three nights ago- devoid of tenderness, love and everything other than animal passion- had once again driven her to pinch-faced silence in his presence and absence. Today had been so bad Harry and Ron had put Ginny on the task of discovering the older witch's problems.

Hermione snorted. She adored Ginny, and the red-head was a clever inquisitor, but Hermione was disinclined to split her aching heart for the younger girl to read, regardless of the confidences that Ginny had vested in her.

And even if she were to talk about it, Hermione had nothing to say. His cold dismissal from his office after their shag on the desk was the reaction of an entirely different man than the gentle, warm lover of twenty-four hours earlier. Ecstasy to ashes in the space of a day. And her blood still boiled for him. What could she say to a third person that would sound sane?

He had not spoken to her since, the walls of her mind produced by her fledgling Occlumency skills encountered nothing but blank space from his, and she had not cared to push into that formidably bleak land. So her head remained bowed as she ate little, as she scratched notes in her classes, as she averted her eyes from the concern of her friends.

Hermione sat at the small desk in this room, shuffling the stacks of paper, absently searching for the pile of notes that belonged to the

current contents of the cauldrons, one thin finger rubbing her temple. She was sitting in a chair that belonged to a man who, as far as she knew, hated her with the same intensity that had come pouring out of those dark eyes her first class with him when she was eleven years old, and her heart pounded with worry for him even as she pretended to read his research.

St. Mungo's psychiatric ward would have a field day with her. Driven to restlessness once more, Hermione surged to her feet and began to pace, potions forgotten as she awaited their master.

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'Every single one of you failed me when the boy was here. Your incompetence will have to be remedied if you don't want to be...replaced.' The stiffening of spines and sharp inhalations told Snape that their lord's meaning had been taken clearly. 'But there is only one true traitor amongst you,' Voldemort continued. 'Only one to be punished tonight.'

Snape's arms tightened ever-so-slightly on the arms of his chair as his lord approached... then passed him, intent on the doorway. The spy twisted in his chair, neck craning with his fellows to observe...

The Dark Lord's wand twitched. 'Why don't you enter, Wormtail?'

The sallow-faced ex-Potions master swallowed hard for the first time in many years as Peter Pettigrew, left arm extended, Dark Mark livid red on the limp wrist and reaching for its caller, floated through the doorway, drawn by his master's wand.

He could not possibly walk, or even stand, so far as Snape could see. His right leg ended at the knee, not so much amputated as shredded-whether by magic or knives, the spy could not tell. His left was broken so sharply that he could see the white bone protruding from flesh midway up his thigh. His silver hand was a melted, molten lump, the metal permanently seared to his blackened forearm, which was cracked open from torture by fire, dried blood caked the arm, and slick, new layers seeped from the charred flesh. His face was riddled with crimson rivers caused by dripping acid, and one eye-socket still wept tears where the eye had been gouged out. His head, too, had

been burnt, and only wisps of grey hair remained to spike out of a pate raw from the effects of flame.

Snape recalled his flickering satisfaction at the fate that would befall the sniveling creature, and shame shafted through him. He had thought of little other than that sacrificing Pettigrew saved him...and Hermione. He had not stopped to consider the true reaction Voldemort was bound to have. His elemental magic snapped at the ends of his fingers, his toes, brewed in his veins. Water and wind knew they could soothe the pain. But to do that was tantamount to suicide.

He reached for his disgust and loathing, calling up the memories of this slobbering thing at the feet of his lord, nearly writhing in pleasure as he revealed the secrets of James and Lily Potter. Fury and cold indifference roared into his brain, tightening his stomach, hardening his heart. Pettigrew's death was despicable, even by Death Eater standards. But then, his life had been as well.

'He is only just alive, this traitor who deprived me of my prize,' Voldemort said coldly. Snape turned his eyes to gaze past the unfortunate man. He was lucky. Lucky that the Memory Connection had worked flawlessly, planting his memories of rescuing Potter in Wormtail's brain. Lucky that he was one of the most powerful Occlumens in the world. Lucky that he had obeyed his lord in regards to Hermione Granger, whatever the personal cost.

But he did not wish to witness any further what would have become of him had he failed.

'Severus.' His lord was not to grant his wish. 'As my most loyal and competent servant, would you do me the honors?' Voldemort gave an almost friendly nod in Pettigrew's direction. The spy knew what he was being ordered to do.

Snape lifted his wand, fastening his eyes on his victim's ruined face. Pettigrew's one good eye betrayed his consciousness, his total awareness of his pain, and the knowledge that he was about to die. It stared at Snape from the other side of hell, and then dropped to the wand pointed directly at him, hope blossoming there for the first time. He was ready to go.



Snape opened his mouth.

‘Not with your wand, Severus,’ Voldemort chided gently, one skeletal finger lightly pushing the wooden rod down to point at the floor. ‘It must be more painful than *Avada Kedavra*.’

‘As you wish, my lord.’ His voice never faltered. He murmured a spell, thrust his wand into his pocket, and withdrew a newly-created knife from his sleeve. ‘I trust this, through his one good eye, should be sufficient?’

Voldemort laughed quietly, and Snape shivered as the sound pooled at the base of his spine, walking up one slow vertebra at a time. ‘I think that will suit admirably. Please.’ The gesture was casual, as if he were cutting a ribbon to open Zonko’s latest store. Snape flipped the knife, felt the weight, backed up six steps-

-and flung it. Silver flashed through the center of Pettigrew’s remaining eye, and blood spurted out in response. The form jerked, twisting in midair- and died. As his body failed, the spell released him, and he struck the floor, red spreading around him.

‘Well thrown,’ Voldemort complimented pleasantly. ‘Bella, Tony- remove the mess.’ Flinching ever-so-slightly, Bellatrix and Antonin Dolohov pulled out their wands and levitated the body, clearing the floor under it of blood, leaving not so much as a drop or a stain.

‘The price a traitor pays,’ the Dark Lord said calmly, watching his two Death Eaters maneuver the body out into the dark corridor. He turned his bright red eyes on the remaining nine, satisfied by their varied expressions of horror and physical illness. Only Snape’s face was blank, eyes shuttered and expressionless.

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Hermione shuddered, revulsion rolling through her in waves, so strong it crossed the distance from Voldemort’s lair to the Hogwarts dungeons. Her stomach came into her throat, bile scorching the back of her mouth.

She swallowed hard once, twice, three times, and the feeling of sickness began to fade. She recognized the discipline imposed by her bond-mate, the firm rejection of his nausea, the control he exerted over himself spilling into her, calming the adrenaline rush that wasn't her own.

When the weight of bone-tired weariness followed a few minutes later, she hurried from the lab and into his office, their established link telling her that he would be there before his meeting with the headmaster. She re-entered his old classroom and went from there into the small, windowless room.

He startled as she walked through the wards she had already broken.

'Miss Granger-' he started coldly, one eyebrow rising.

*I am alone. Don't you dare turn me away,* she told him voicelessly, cutting him off as fire and earth flowed from her fingers to probe his form, checking for injuries the eyes could not see.

The warm white-blue light of healing did not activate, and elemental magic withdrew, content that he was physically well.

Dark brown eyes sought black ones and held. She could feel his distaste for what he had seen, emotion teeming through his mental barriers as his steady hands poured the tea he had called into being on his desk. He handed her the first cup automatically. She took it, and deliberately captured his hand, seeking to see what he had-

*No!* He jerked away from her, a dark scowl lining his face. 'Those memories are not for you to see, Granger.' He looked away from her, his cheeks drawn inward as he said quietly, 'I do not protect you only for you to see the ugliness it requires.'

Silence, then, hoping to relieve the black look on his face, 'What happened?'

'Nothing. It is none of your concern.'

She stared at him over her teacup for a moment before setting the steaming liquid down. 'Nothing?' she repeated back to him in disbelief.

Worry was fast fading, and rising disappointment and desire took its place.

‘I am not accountable to you for what I do!’ he snarled.

‘No, but you will fuck me on your desk and throw me out without a word!’ She steadied herself, and her voice dropped several decibels for a freezing, ‘Forgive me for wasting your time.’

She turned for the door, only to find him standing casually in front of her, blocking her escape.

‘Get out of it, Snape,’ she spat. ‘I’m going to bed.’

‘Are you?’ he asked silkily. The tea had steadied him quickly as it always did, and his magic urged him forward, ardor doubled by his contact with death. One long finger stretched to trace her ear, light contact sensitizing the miniscule hairs there, and the other hand was at the collar of her robes, sliding cool black buttons out of their holes, exposing first the sloped lines of her collarbones, then the smooth expanse of white skin above her breasts, and finally the shapely, satin-clad curves that fit so well into his large hands.

Hermione’s body traitorously leaned into his ministrations, but as his thumb began describing tiny circles in a ring around her nipple, bra peeled back to expose the hard nub, she batted him away angrily, hands swiftly moving to cover what he had stripped. Her breasts hurt with lust, and the heat between her thighs urged her to forget their last meeting and accept his all-too-welcome attentions. She ignored them with a will born of many years of stubborn study.

‘I am going to bed.’ The repetition was shaky, but the set to her jaw and chilly glaze over her eyes left her lover with little doubt that she meant it.

Snape struggled to look down at her instead of seizing her, holding her to him and kissing her until she was incoherent. Golden-blue sizzled over his hands, meshing with brown-red not six inches away. ‘Is that really what you want?’ he managed. He could feel want surging in her, he had to try to convince her-

The ice in her eyes froze his desire instantly. He had dismissed her from the office the last time he had seen her like this, as if she were no more than one of the thousands he had taught, and the still-blaring hurt of that rejection was something she made no attempt to hide from him with Occlumency, stronger and more pointed than her rising tide of sexual need.

‘Yes, *sir*,’ she bestowed the honorific with as much disdain as she could muster, ‘It is *exactly* what I want.’

The dark-haired man stepped aside awkwardly, not wanting her to see his erection, though he knew she could feel it anyway. She hesitated for a moment, eyes thawing... then exited the doors, head high and fists clenched to whiteness with the effort of walking away from him.

He watched her exit his classroom, longing still pulsing through both of them so painfully he could feel her squirming...

He had taken two unheeded steps in her wake, his breathing labored as his heart sank, stomach clenching with a craving both natural and driven by magic- he forced himself to stop at the open doors of his office, grasping the cold, stone frame so hard it bit into his fingers and palm.

*I cannot follow. I cannot follow. I cannot follow.*

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Hermione sighed as she pushed off the smooth wall of the prefects’ bath yet again. Her fury and frustration had been worked out by half-an-hour’s fast swimming in the small pool. One of the things she ardently missed about the Muggle world was the Olympic-sized indoor pool two blocks from her house, and the large but deep, freezing Hogwarts lake was not an option. The prefects’ marble-lined, seven-by-ten-by-ten bath was the next best thing, and she had been using it more and more often.

She gritted her teeth against the assault of need that flared as soon as she stopped. She had been hoping that she could finally wear herself out enough to sleep, but it seemed that her ability to lose

consciousness without sleeping potions decreased with every passing night that she did not have sex. Her elements hummed at her, angry at being denied their wish earlier in his office, pounding in her blood, refusing her rest.

If she had hoped sanity would come from their....relationship?...she was ruefully realizing that she had simply traded one madness for another. It was no longer impossible to sit in his presence without touching him, and she had welcomed her return to Defense Against the Dark Arts. But an ancient, primal magic seethed through her body and all it wanted was to have her hands all over him- regardless of his coldness and rejection...

Furious, she shoved away from the marble again, feeling her feet slip as she launched into the middle of the pool, arms angrily slapping the water, sending rain down on the silver and gold taps around her.

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'You killed Peter Pettigrew.' Dumbledore's blue eyes were flat, disappointment weaving around the older man like his mane of white hair. 'He owed Harry a life debt.'

'So he did. So do I.'

'Severus...' The Headmaster sighed, leaning back in his chair. Pettigrew's demise was neither unexpected nor wholly unwelcome, but it was a waste of a potential ally, and the younger man's deliberate callousness disturbed his employer.

'I followed the orders I was given.'

'You *ensured* that order would be given!' Dumbledore snapped. 'You purposefully blamed him!'

'He was the only one of us that could be sacrificed. The Dark Lord would not believe it was another- they hate you and Potter too much to risk their lives to rescue him, but a life debt...that was a believable alibi, all but a requirement, and I have managed- through protecting Potter here- to allay the magical debt, keep it quiet. Pettigrew has

not.' Dumbledore's face did not soften, blue eyes still flinty. 'For Merlin's sake, man, would you rather I had died?'

'You know how I feel about those kinds of questions. Of course not. But there had to have been another way.' The Headmaster shook his head. 'There is *a/ways* another way.'

Silence descended until the older man cleared his throat. 'I believe I am ready to retire, Severus. I must bid you goodnight.'

Snape sat very still for a moment longer, bowed his head, and stood. His mentor's thorough disappointment shook him. Dumbledore understood war and sacrifice- that this one made such a difference impacted the spy deeply. But there had been nothing else to do. Potter's escape had clearly been an inside job...which meant someone had to take the blame and the fall. Pettigrew had been expendable, a sacrifice Snape had planned. But perhaps...the door closed behind him quietly, leaving him with his shadows for company in the stairwell...perhaps the Headmaster had needed Pettigrew for some other purpose.

Snape shook himself and started down the stairs. What was done, was done. Pettigrew was dead. And even the Headmaster himself could not raise the dead.

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She felt him enter as she smoothly flipped over and pushed away from the slick wall one more time. Without thinking, she surfaced, and a wandless, wordless, flick of her wrist sent sparkling orange and light, dirt-brown sparks from her fingertips and Snape was suddenly standing on the clean, white floor stark naked, his clothing neatly folded by the entrance.

Her voice came, unbidden. 'Joining me, Snape?'

'You seem to have changed your mind in the past hour,' he remarked dryly, lowering himself into the warm bath. He swallowed as he met her dark eyes and the emotions beneath them. Disgust. Desire. Need. Fear. Pain. She had changed her mind from need, not trust or love.

‘What are you doing here?’

*Don't ask that question.*

*Then leave. You have turned me away from your door twice, and I tire of trying. I asked you to let me alone, Snape.*

Regret. A sincere sorrow for what he had done overtook him, and the emotion left his mind before he could censor it. The sudden stiffening and wary relaxation of her face reflected the genuine remorse that he had sent.

‘Why?’ she asked softly.

‘Your arrival in your student uniform...on my desk...’ His mind was closed again as he spun her a story. *Lies, on top of lies, on top of lies. I lie to protect her, to deceive her, to make her loathe me...*

‘Have you not experienced enough self-disgust in your lifetime?’ Her tone was gentle, and Snape averted his eyes. This was what made her easy to break- a few soft-spoken words brought her back, without any of the demands she was within her rights to make, forgiveness given because it was her nature.

‘Snape?’ Her inquiry interrupted his silence, and he turned to her, face smooth and impassive as he paddled towards her, his long arms reaching her in a few strokes, and slid his hands around her bared body, savoring the long, sleek expanses of her skin, soaked through by water and slick from the soapy bubbles. He cradled her against him, his grasp tightening as tears of rage and helplessness stung his eyes.

‘Severus, what...?’ It was the first time she had used his name, and he willed all his shields to close her out, to keep her at bay- if she could feel his heartbreak, he would have already betrayed her...

He hastily blinked away the tears as he kissed her forehead. Her head tilted upwards to meet his mouth as he kissed her again, pressing her to him ferociously, gentleness fading into heat, her firm breasts squashed against him, her hands on his face, tracing his ears and fluttering down his neck as he kissed her insistently, mouth soft,

tongue tracing the inside of her lips, darting in to taste all the corners, flavored differently by the many bubbles clinging to her skin.

Her hands skimmed over his body, magic and water seething around them, over his sensitive nipples and the tight, scar-crossed abdomen she was quickly learning. 'Could you feel me in here?' she asked, breath escaping in a rush as she felt his erection push against her clit, probing for entrance.

*Of course.* Her hands were massaging the inside of his thighs, straying ever-closer to his cock as he pressed kisses down her chest, at her collarbone, at the peak between her breasts, trailing down as he lifted her out of the pool, water sluicing off her skin to bead in his hair, his mouth touching above her belly button, below it, and continuing until he placed a kiss on soft, wet curls.

Fire seared through him, the element so hot he gasped into her, breathing soap and arousal, desire eliminating thought. His tongue darted out, finding her clit, massaging it gently. Fingernails dug into his shoulders as she hissed in pleasure above him, body shuddering under the assault as his mouth sought corners of her previously untouched.

When he let her slide back into the water, he was ready, and thrust into her, water preceding him in a warm wave as he shoved her against the marble wall of the bath.

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'Hermione?'

Hermione froze in the portrait-hole, the Fat Lady's sharp rebuke still ringing in her ears. She had not expected the common room to be occupied. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning.

'Ginny?' her voice echoed the younger girl's, praying that it was indeed her.

'What are you doing awake?' The red-head was scrambling out of the armchair closest to the fire and was fast approaching her. 'And soaking wet?'



Hermione winced, touching her hair. It was still dripping, and was in fact making the carpet directly beneath her body, still leaning half-in and half-out of the entrance, quite wet.

‘It’s not raining. And your robes aren’t wet,’ Ginny noticed. ‘Hermione, where have you been?’

‘I couldn’t sleep.’ At least that much was true. ‘I went for a bath in the prefects’ bathroom near Hufflepuff.’

‘I see.’ The look that Ginny raked over her made the older witch uncomfortably aware that the youngest member of the Weasley family was far more observant than Harry or Ron. She tightened her robes about herself, as if their love-making in the bath could be seen by the other girl.

‘Alone?’

It took a moment for the question to sink all the way through. Hermione blinked, and knew she was blushing furiously. ‘Alone? Yes, of course.’

Ginny sighed. ‘Liar.’

‘Gin-’

‘You’re *wrong* this year, Hermione,’ Ginny told her flatly, turning away to walk back to the fire. ‘I might spend my nights between nightmares and wishing that Harry Potter would stop trying to protect me by pushing me out, but even I have been more here than you.’

An irritated cough from the Fat Lady prompted Hermione to finish coming through the hole, staring at Ginny’s back as she folded into her chair, words refusing to come to mind or tongue.

‘If you don’t want to tell the boys, fine,’ she continued, now staring into the flames. ‘But you’re clearly preoccupied. Not eating, then glowing with happiness, then pale to the point of transparency. Even Ron has noticed.’ Ginny leaned forward. ‘Who is it, Hermione?’

Hermione's eyes hit the floor, embarrassment flooding her. Even Ron had noticed... But sharing the mind of Severus Snape had allowed her to glean a few tricks, and when she lifted her face again, any flush was the orange of the fire, her expression impassive.

'I have been worried about my family,' she lied quietly. 'It has nothing to do with a boy.' So saying, she strode past the armchair and up the spiral stairway to her dorm, leaving the witch behind her shaking her head, unconvinced.

As she undressed, the single candle settled on her bedside table cast light on a bruise darkening her abdomen, another on her left breast. She touched them gingerly, grateful when they didn't hurt. She hurried into her pajamas and scrambled under her sheets, burrowing into their softness.

But sleep did not come, in spite of her body's satiated desire. She was no longer tired. He had conjured a pillow of air that barely lifted her above the pool after their love making, and had set about massaging her, from her ankles upwards. Somewhere around the middle of her back, she had fallen asleep, lulled by his strong fingers. When she had awakened, still resting on the air mattress that he made for her, she had found herself alone. She had slowly gathered her clothes and returned to the tower.

Guilt settled into her stomach, a knot growing in weight that eventually returned after every passing encounter. Against everything in her life that she cherished- her friends, her parents, her work, the war- she shared this strange obsession that she was no closer to taming than when her knees had buckled in his classroom.

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He was growing more aware of her every time. Even as he stood, his back to her as he coached Malfoy through the difficulties of a Paring Curse he could feel her as if he were inside her, her breathing, the unceasing beat of her heart.

And her shame. Her conscience at war with her need and her practicality. Her wish not to hide from her friends at the same time that she knew secrecy was required, and the reception they would

give her would make the bottom of the lake in January a warm environment.

As he turned to the next Slytherin, his elements crackled hopefully, feeling the nearness of their siblings. He ruthlessly suppressed it, clasp his hands behind his back, narrowing his field of focus. It would never do for his master to see how often she spilled into his thoughts.

'No. To strike properly, you must slash,' he told Millicent Bulstrode. Using his own wand, he made a swift motion, and the stuffed pillow in front of him gashed open, white fluff puffing out. '*Reparo*,' he ordered calmly, and the pillow stitched itself back together.

It was a dangerous curse to teach them, to be sure, but he had set up wards, ensuring that if the spell did not strike the pillow, it would dissipate on the shields around the pillows, placed in an overlapping pattern throughout the classroom.

He had not thought that Neville Longbottom could possibly hurt anyone with the tight-knit shields cloaking the classroom. He was to find himself, unfortunately, mistaken.

The room's magic shifted subtly, as magic often did before a cataclysmic incident, akin to the charge in the air right before lightning strikes. Tuned to both the magic and his agitation, Hermione also ceased practice as the professor whirled, seeking the disturbance.

The end of Longbottom's wand exploded as Snape's black eyes found the boy, Hermione and Snape both reacted, elemental magic channeled towards the accident and one another.

Time slowed. His students were not moving quickly enough, and the magic Longbottom's wand was spewing would hurt or kill the lot of them. It was already eating through the shields against the Paring Curse. His water and air extended to contain the magical outburst. He marveled as it folded the unexpected outburst of power in on itself, pushing the reaction into a tiny area of space, encasing it in water and air, projecting backwards into the wand that controlled it.

Hermione's fire and earth closed Neville himself in a full shield, as the potent spell blazed back towards him, it bounced from her elements to Snape's, fizzling as the more powerful magics checked it. With a final, angry sputter, the violet light spat a single spark onto Neville's desk and disappeared.

As the magic canceled itself out of existence, the world returned to normal speed, and they slumped in identical postures. Though the whole affair had taken no more than ten seconds, Hermione felt as if she'd played all fourteen positions in a Quidditch match at once. After three deep breaths, she lifted her head, sweat pouring off her face to plaster the fine wisps of curls there.

She instantly wished she hadn't. The entire class was staring at her, Neville in semi-grateful shock, the rest of them with gaping open mouths. Eyes darted from her to her professor. She took a another shaking breath-

'It seems that your experiment does indeed work, Miss Granger,' Snape's voice was laced with a venom so strong it stiffened her back. 'Ten points from Gryffindor for such a flashy, inappropriate display. And I suggest that the next time you decide to 'borrow' someone else's magic to compliment your paltry power, you do it from one of your friends.'

## To Explain and Deceive

'Hermione, what was that?' Harry asked as they started to pack their books. Snape's deadly temper had kept all questions in check for the duration of the period, but now that class was out, the boys were clustered around her eagerly. Snape glanced up, saw her at the center of a knot of red-and-gold scarves and snorted. She was indeed going to have some interesting lying to do.

As was he. It was too much to hope that the Headmaster would not know by dinner. He toyed with the thought of detaining her, and let it go. He would know what lies she told by the openness of her mind.

'Professor?' her voice came out breathlessly. Perhaps he was not to be allowed that option. He hazarded a look up to see a group of the curious clustered by the door, Potter and Weasley trying to be subtle about gripping their wands.

'Yes, Miss Granger?' His focus was on back on his desk, coolly marking places in books and assigning grades for the lesson.

'I wanted to apologize for-'

'Stealing what wasn't yours?' he finished, tone clipped. And as he spoke aloud, a second current of thought undercut his voice. 'Granger, I have no use-'

*I don't know what it was either, Granger, but it was obviously elemental-*

'-for your sniveling excuses and attempts to ingratiate yourself-'

*-and extraordinarily powerful. Therefore, we can assume that it is connected-*

'-with those who have no use for you. Get out of my classroom, Granger, before I remove another ten points.'

*- to the bond, and possibly to the consummation of it. We will study it further.*

‘Yes, sir,’ she replied neutrally.

*What kind of study did you have in mind?* Her mental voice was cheeky and delighted, and in spite of the wrenching fear that he felt for her and his worry over this wholly unexpected development, his mouth twitched.

*Wench!*

‘I believe I said you were dismissed. As long as you have no further excuses for wasting my time...?’

Trying to look appropriately chastised and hurt while puzzling over his unspoken thoughts, and taming the humor in her eyes, Hermione moved back towards her friends.

Harry and Ron cast looks of loathing over their shoulders as they left, and Hermione felt the twist of shame in her stomach tighten further. Another lie, added to a growing mound of them. She would have to discover what had actually caused the strange- if useful- outburst. Should it happen again, at a less opportune time or in a more volatile situation...

‘What experiment? What was he talking about? What did you do?’ Dean pressed as the heavy door closed on their heels. Seamus, Ron, Harry and Neville waited expectantly for her answer, Lavender and Parvati a short distance away, their curiosity no less, but certainly more contained.

‘It’s a type of wandless magic that I’m working on with Professor McGonagall,’ she invented quickly. She was McGonagall’s favorite student, and the strict Head of Gryffindor was the perfect choice to keep them from checking to verify her story- no one would dare ask Professor McGonagall. ‘It’s for containing explosions. I really thought it would be more useful in Potions, or in the common room with all the Weasley products floating around.’ She leveled Ron a look, but he did no more than look even more intrigued.

‘Or for battle situations,’ Harry offered.

Hermione inclined her head. 'Or for battle situations. Maybe. Obviously I have some work to do on it- that was totally unexpected.'

'Snape said you "borrowed" his power,' Harry pressed.

'*Professor* Snape, Harry,' she corrected automatically. 'I don't have enough to execute on my own.'

'But why his? He wasn't even the closest one to you,' Dean asked.

'No- but he was the most powerful and best trained wizard in the room,' she countered.

Harry's eyes gleamed. 'Wait! But that means...do you think you could do it to Voldemort?'

Ron followed on his friend's thought, 'Was Snape weaker after it happened?'

'Ron...Harry...I don't think it works that way,' she cautioned, heart sinking. Leave it to them to turn a lie she dashed off to protect herself and Snape into the hope of their final confrontation.

'But what if it does? You *have* to ask him. If he was even the littlest bit weaker or distracted, we can use that. Ask him, Hermione!' Harry's green eyes blazed, almost feverish in their excitement.

'You've *got* to,' Ron added his voice. 'He was definitely distracted, at the very least.'

She swallowed hard. 'I will. I promise.'

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'I heard a most interesting story about you earlier today, Severus,' the Headmaster opened as he spooned potatoes onto his plate, smiling at Pomona Sprout as he levitated the brussel sprouts from her end of the table.

‘About me, Headmaster?’ His features did not change, though he knew what was coming. ‘Some second year convinced that I’m a vampire come to murder the lot of them?’

‘Hardly. This is more in the nature of gossip I am inclined to believe. It seems that Neville Longbottom had mishap in your classroom. And that you and Hermione Granger put it right again in a- shall we say unusual?- manner.’

‘Longbottom was being a menace as usual. We were fortunate to halt his accident when and where we did, though her method was peculiar- she stole power from me to stop his spell.’

‘Did she? Be that as it may, the cause of the rumor is rather alarming. Do try to ensure that Miss Granger’s latent powers don’t tangle with Mr. Longbottom to cause any further incidents in your classroom.’ Dumbledore ordered politely. Snape sent a sidelong glance at his employer. Did he know? He had promised to fire the Defense teacher should he ever touch Hermione Granger, but his offhand “Did she?” sounded like he knew more than he was letting on.

It was impossible to tell. A better Occlumens than Snape was Legilimens, Dumbledore’s thoughts could not be penetrated. And the blue eyes sparkled with their usual twinkle, neither condemnation nor acceptance making an appearance in their depths as the Headmaster turned to his deputy, presenting Snape with his back.

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‘Severus’ reaction with Miss Granger in his classroom,’ Minerva began without preamble, sitting forward in her chair next to the fireplace in his office. ‘What do you make of it?’

‘I don’t know,’ Dumbledore answered honestly, his good hand running through the silver fall of his beard, tugging at stray knots. ‘He said she used his power.’

‘Truth? Or the necessary lie to cover himself?’ she challenged.

‘Again, I cannot say. It could be both. The castle says they worked in tandem.’



Minerva shivered slightly. She would never get used to her husband's ability to touch the lives of the thousand within Hogwarts by consulting the castle itself. A useful talent, it was nevertheless too eerie.

'Maybe it's time we told them. Or at least,' she flipped an irritated hand as he opened his mouth to object, 'it's time that you told them. That you know. That their relationship is causing the castle to behave...strangely.'

Dumbledore shook his head, frowning both at the idea of confronting Snape and his own reluctance to do so.

'Albus! What is to be gained by keeping it from them? They could endanger everyone else! And they could probably use advice, at the very least!' she exploded. 'Miss Granger especially!'

'There is something outside this that I do not understand and dare not interfere with,' he replied quietly. 'I do not think they are a threat to anyone other than themselves. The story the stones tell is a strange one, of power and passion – whatever they are doing, however they are going about it-'

'It doesn't change the fact that she is seventeen, was a virgin until recently and *needs* an older woman's advice. Let me talk to her,' Minerva returned, her voice equally low but no less impassioned than before. 'She has no mother to guide her through this- let me, Albus.'

'No, Minerva!' The look on his face was terrible, eyes full of a fear that Minerva had not thought him capable of feeling. 'If you tell her, Severus will know. She keeps no secrets from him. Between his talent as a Legilimens and the connection their minds have through the bond...he can't know you know.'

'Why? Albus – what are you not telling me?' She knew better than to try to prize into her husband's mind, but she was furious and fearful. Cracking the ring this summer had altered him immensely, and he had been distant, withdrawn and reserved ever since. She only partly knew the lessons that he shared with Harry, and that Hermione was being taught Occlumency. In their many years of marriage, he had never kept so much from her. Not even in the first war.

He cracked a smile, one that did not touch his eyes. 'That would be telling.'

'Damn it, Albus! This isn't a game!' she snapped angrily. 'This isn't "nitwit, blubber, oddment, tweak", so that we can all admire your brilliance and your eccentricity. I am not a first year.' Her voice got much quieter suddenly, her eyes dropping to the ground. 'I'm your wife.' At the last, she sounded defeated, completely worn out. 'What do you expect me to do but hound you day in and day out?'

His good hand left his beard to touch her face, tracing the high cheekbones under large, dark eyes. *I am dying. But if you knew that, my love, you'd never forgive me for doing what I must.* 'Minerva-' his voice caught, and he ruthlessly suppressed it. 'Minerva, please, give me your patience, just for a little longer. By the end of the year, it will be resolved. I promise.'

Minerva nodded, covering his hand with her smaller one. But as her eyes drifted downwards, they snagged on the blackened hand that he kept tucked away and made her own decision. Severus knew, and come hell, high water or Merlin, that man would tell her what he knew.

888

'Party invitations,' Ginny tossed the gilded letter down on the table with disgust. "'Slughorn's Christmas Bash.'" Bollocks.'

'Might be fun,' Hermione suggested, eyes sparkling.

'Who would you bring?' Ginny immediately challenged hopefully.

Hermione sighed and rolled her eyes, sitting back from the younger girl. Ginny had not ceased to pester her for the past two and a half weeks, and as snow had gathered on the ground, Hermione had found the girl around unlikely corners, dogging her footsteps determinedly when Quidditch, Harry and Draco Malfoy hadn't occupied her. Curfew had kept her from learning anything, but six older brothers had taught Ginny much, and Hermione knew she was running on borrowed time.

'Who?' the younger girl pressed.

‘Who?’ Hermione replied, dragging the word out lazily. She turned in her seat to observe the hall gradually filling up around them with tousled-headed boys and girls who had clearly been awake enough to charm their hair straight or curled as the mood suited them. At Slytherin table, Blaise Zabini was showing off his invitation to Malfoy, who bent over it with narrowed eyes, and there, coming through the door...

Hermione almost groaned with her own idea. But it would throw Ginny in the completely wrong direction. ‘Cormac.’

It had the desired effect. Pumpkin juice sprayed everywhere as Ginny coughed her disbelief. Hermione arched an eyebrow in unconscious imitation of their Slytherin professor.

‘McLaggen?’ Ginny gasped, when she had finished coughing.

‘Do you know any other Cormacs?’ Hermione asked innocently.

‘No. Hermione, you’re joking.’ Ginny’s brown eyes were round with horror as she watched him lumber across the floor towards the Gryffindor table. ‘You’ve got to be having me on.’

‘Do I?’ Nerving herself to do it in spite of her stomach’s violent objections, she rose from the table and sauntered up to the boy. ‘Cormac,’ she murmured sweetly. ‘How would you like to go to Slughorn’s party with me?’

He looked thunderstruck for an instant, but anything that was good enough for Potter and Weasley was all the better for him. What would Weasley say if, after cheating him out of his position, Cormac showed up at Slughorn’s party with Hermione Granger on his arm?

‘I – definitely,’ he spluttered.

‘Thanks!’ She made herself pop up on her tiptoes and kiss his cheek.

The wave of jealous fury that slammed into a moment later nearly stopped her in the middle of the hall as she headed back towards a shocked Ginny, wiping out her feelings of triumphant glee.

Snape lifted his head from his breakfast to see the curly head he adored pressed against the cheek of a Gryffindor boy he just barely recognized. He had no time to control his instinctive reaction, and the pitcher of water in his hand shattered as wind and water stretched to reclaim what was theirs.

The surge of magic only reached just beyond his plate before he reined it. And the water spilling over the sides of the tablecloth were currently engaging the closest members of the staff as he stored his anger, reaction unnoticed.

‘Severus! Help?’ Minerva snapped pointedly, waving at the partial handle that was all he still held in his hand. ‘What on earth did you do that for?’

‘To give you a little extra work before classes begin for the day, Minerva,’ he replied absently, not joining the wand-waving that was mopping up. Granger had resumed her seat next to the Weasley girl and was pointedly not looking at him, though her emotions echoed at the back of his mind, a mixture of disgusted disbelief and laughter.

He could feel the sincerity of her total disinterest. That did nothing for the fact that he nevertheless wanted to strangle the hapless boy still standing slightly dumbfounded in the middle of the hall. But he contented himself with a glower, ignoring the annoyed glances of his colleagues as the last of the water vanished from the table.

Hermione leaned against the warm edge of the glass, waiting, her body growing more impatient by the minute as she waited for her professor to join her. He was on his way, she could feel his faint mental signature passing through the stones of the castle one hundred meters distant, but she jiggled her legs against the cold and the mounting pressure of her body.

They had never arranged so formal a meeting. Perhaps he had the answers to their outburst in the classroom two and a half weeks ago. Frantic studying, Ron and Harry’s increasingly wild theories and her

own desperate attempts to keep one of them from going to Professor McGonagall and exposing her was driving her almost as mad as the bond. And she was no closer to understanding their sudden flare than she was when it had happened.

Bitterness matched the apprehension rippling in the young woman's body as she gazed at the parrot tulips through the glass, the site of their first, fierce match. This – the resulting conflagration - was not what she wanted. The relief following the initial consummation had become an addiction she could not dignify by calling a relationship. With a lover more than twice her age who also stood sneering over her in a class room, a man who ran hot and cold by turns, her life had acquired a sheen of surrealism. Few soft words, little real conversation and absolutely no romance. A secret that had swiftly lost its thrill and a magical bond that constantly drained her energy. What had remained of her childhood following Voldemort's rise had been sucked away all at once, consumed by the fire that rampaged through her body.

*If this is what it's like to have a soul mate, I'll pass,* she thought moodily. She remembered the Burrow longingly, where all she had wanted was to feel his mouth touching hers, his hands against her hips, her thighs, her breasts. But there she had been given access to his mind, and it never occurred to her that to have what she burned for would mean surrendering that which she most valued.

Sighing, she pushed away from the glass to let the cold air nip at her arms and back. He was nearly here. She still clung to the memory of his masked face at the Riddle House, the burning of his eyes and his voice in her head. *I love you.* He had never repeated the sentiment, but she could not rid herself of its echo.

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Snape hesitated as he stood at the threshold of his office, cradling his peculiar, Disillusioned bundle. He could just go and tell her his thoughts, shag her and depart. That would handle the whispers of ether and water for the next few days. He wasn't supposed to be courting the girl, and he didn't have the faintest idea of how to actually go about it.

And what his master would say...he snorted. In nearly two decades, he had had nothing to himself, nothing for himself...

*And this? Done at his bidding, does this qualify as something I have for myself?* he wondered cynically. *Or is this simply one of the most pleasurable orders I have followed? It lives and dies at his command.*

He swallowed, squeezed the parcel in his hands and stepped out of the door. Happiness was an emotion he had long ago surrendered the dream of touching. Now he had memories - a summer's worth of them - her weight on the bed beside him as she transcribed, her hands on a cutting board, the ends of her hair in her mouth as she thought. And sometimes now, when the light caught her hair, when he saw her laughing, when she focused so hard on learning that her eyes never moved from her work, that he forgot to breathe for gazing, wishing that he could frame her there, unchanging.

He was a poor suitor at best, but he owed her an attempt, a small return for what she had – knowing and unknowing – given to him.

Soon, memories would be the only things she would have left.

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‘Snape.’

‘Granger.’

The silence that ensued was awkward, as it always was when they were left in stillness instead of succumbing to a raging tide of magic.

Not that it didn't seethe hopefully, limning both bodies with a faint luminescence, but ignoring its insistent desires until they became physical compulsions had become habit.

‘Poetic, meeting here,’ Hermione forayed into the difficulties of conversation, flipping a hand at the site of their first encounter.

‘Simply inconspicuous. No one would bat an eye if they came upon me forcing a student to serve detention procuring potions ingredients.’

Another silence. 'I wonder at you, Granger,' he said suddenly, voice perfectly neutral. 'Your silence. It seems that in class you always have so much to say.' She looked at him sharply, and his black eyes sparkled with humor for just a moment in his otherwise passive face.

He had broken the awkwardness. 'What's in the bundle?' she asked, nodding to it. Cautiously, worried lest it be incorrectly packed, Snape hesitantly unfolded a heavy navy-blue blanket from around a picnic basket. Hermione blinked at the basket, then lifted her face, and the years she had gained in the past term dropped away to expose the bright-eyed seventeen-year-old that still dwelt behind her suddenly-aged features.

Brilliant with excitement, her gaze sparkled as she asked eagerly, 'A picnic? In November? Where?'

Snape smiled a slow, closed-lipped smile, and Hermione felt her heart pull. She could hear his relief at her evident surprise and pleasure. Without thinking, she stepped forward, reaching to touch his face.

He stiffened at the contact, automatically backing away. *Not here.*

She jerked her hand back, ignoring the faint hurt she felt at his rebuff.

*Come.* He started into the forest, and with a little hesitation, she followed.

He led her to a snow-covered patch of ground that was little more than a hole in the trees. Casting charms for the firmness of the snow and a warming spell that would leave the white ground untouched, they unfolded the blanket and smoothed out the edges, placing the basket in the middle. He murmured a spell, and a shimmering web of silver sprang into place around the blanket.

'A Chameleon Charm,' he said as she gazed at it quizzically. When she reached to touch it, his mental warning slapped her hand away. 'Like a Chameleon, it is discovered if you touch it. But it makes this look like a bed of entirely boring dried leaves and snow.' He murmured another charm, and her head jerked to him, the sound familiar.

‘What was that?’

‘A charm to ensure that we cannot be heard.’

‘*Muffliato?*’ she asked suddenly. The narrowing of his eyes and the surprise he did not contain quickly enough told her that she had guessed right.

‘How is it that you know that spell? I am fairly sure that it did not make it into *The Standard Book of Spells: Grade Six*.’

‘I...er...I heard it, somewhere,’ she lied.

‘Granger. I am linked to you by magic, I am one of the most powerful Legilimens in the world and even without that help, you are a terrible liar. *Where* did you hear it?’

‘Not your business, Snape,’ she replied coolly, bringing all of her Occlumency training to the forefront of her mind, effectively blockading him as long as he did not force the issue. She could feel his stare on her for a few more moments, then his decision to wait on it, and she gave a mental sigh of relief. He would not use his Legilimency on her, which she had not doubted. But he could have made her life very unpleasant without needing mind-penetration abilities. And even as he gave up for the moment, his dark eyes remained locked on her for a long time as she fussed with the edge of the blanket.

When he finally sat down, Hermione did not reach for the food. Instead, she knelt next to Snape, the snow taking her weight without sinking, and took one of his hands.

Puzzlement flitted through her mental landscape and she answered, ‘I’m learning you.’ His fingers were long and thin, flaring wider at the joints, callused at their tips from long exposure to heat. They met a palm that was white and hard, though not as translucent as hers.

‘You are still not eating enough,’ he remarked quietly, capturing her hand in his bigger one, squeezing the fingers gently. ‘Granger,’ he prompted when she neither answered nor looked at him. ‘You must take care of yourself.’



She smiled tiredly, the old look creeping back over her face. 'The magic makes me not hungry.'

He wrapped his arms around her, and she shifted to sit between his long legs, his knees tucked to enclose her as well, her back against his chest. Fire and water hummed happily, blue merging with the orange in spiraling patterns that seemed to sink into and emerge from her pale skin. One finger delicately traced a blue vein in her forearm, sensitizing the hairs and sending shivers to her stomach.

'I seem to recall you feeding me once,' he started quietly. She felt him swallow against her back. His free hand flipped at the basket, opening it releasing the aroma of roasted chicken into their warm bubble. He Summoned a piece wandlessly and offered it to her.

She took it from him, refusing to open her mouth like a three-year-old, and nibbled at it in a desultory way.

'Eat, Granger. You have to be in shape to keep Potter from killing himself before he destroys the Dark Lord.'

Her next few bites were larger, though she chewed them slowly before finally asking, 'Why don't you have trouble eating?'

'I am not seventeen and female. My hormones are long since under control.'

Her flash of indignation amused him as she sat up so that she could twist her head and glare at him.

'Hormones? That's what this-' she indicated the flickering magic weaving over both them, '-is? *Hormones?*'

'No. But your lack of ability to eat is simply that.' As she relaxed, his hands found their way into her hair and stroked it, using magic to untangle the knots rather than pull through them.

She turned her head, settling it neatly beneath his chin, discovering that she could fold her body to fit his. They sat in peaceful silence for a few moments, and he could feel her jaw chewing against his chest,

her throat swallowing. Finally, she asked what hovered at the edge of her mind.

‘What do you know?’

*Many things*, he thought, amusement flickering.

‘You know what I mean,’ she said in exasperation. She bit a little more chicken off the bone. ‘About Neville and class?’

‘I know that Longbottom should not be allowed to perform magic in any capacity,’ he jibed.

Hermione frowned. ‘You frighten him. Neville is quite talented at defense, ever since he met Bellatrix.’

Snape stiffened, fingers tightening on his knee and in her hair. ‘Do not encourage his impulse for revenge. She is insane as well as a fanatic. She would not hesitate to kill him.’

‘I know. But his hatred for her has vastly improved his skills.’

‘Vengeance leads to stupidity and destruction,’ he murmured. ‘I would not wish that on anyone. Even Longbottom.’

Hermione considered this, and he caught her, *But it is so useful*.

‘Very Slytherin, Granger. Useful it may be. So am I, and yet I would actively discourage another from following in my footsteps.’

‘It is difficult to formulate an argument when you interrupt my thoughts,’ she replied. ‘Whether or not Neville avenges his parents, he is becoming a talented wizard. Potions will never be his subject, but he could probably succeed in Defense. None of which,’ she continued before he could object, ‘is relevant. Have you learned anything about what happened in class?’

‘I only have a theory based on the operation of elemental magic as understood by the Order of the Ang’guin Weyr.’

‘What? There’re only two books in the library on it – one on theory and the other on the history of the Order. Are there more?’

‘Several dozen, actually, as well as all the surviving journals when wizards started recording history.’ Her eagerness brimmed as she sat up straight and twisted to look at him. He smiled gently. ‘They are all extraordinarily rare and difficult to come by. They are also licensed books, being extremely dangerous in the wrong hands. The Headmaster owns them as part of his personal collection and has graciously allowed me to borrow them.’

It was Hermione’s turn to sit up straight. ‘Does he know?’

‘Given the Headmaster’s penchant for omniscience, I would say that chances are high that he does. But he has said nothing to me.’

She caught her lower lip between her teeth and worried it. ‘You cannot change now whether he knows or not,’ Snape assured her quietly. ‘Do not worry about it.’

Another silence, this one filled with an anxiety that made her fidgety. ‘Neville and the magic,’ she finally prompted as she started to squirm.

‘As you wish.’ He ran his hands through her hair once more before speaking. ‘Elemental magic builds on itself. It’s why the bond grows stronger over time and physical contact. Less than a year ago, I could no more feel your presence in the castle than I can Potter’s now. But the potential was always there, and I believe I triggered it when I healed you.’

‘Why then?’ she interjected. ‘Why not when you were attempting to protect us in the Shrieking Shack?’

‘When did you start menstruating regularly?’ he asked. Her surprise and embarrassment blazed through their bond, and he stroked her arm gently, peeling back her sleeve to run his fingers along her soft skin there.

*I have to know if I am to answer your question.*

*At the beginning of fourth year. Kind of late for most girls.* He could feel the flash of mortification that belonged to a younger Hermione, an awkward girl wondering why her housemates all fell into rhythm with the moon while she spotted infrequently for almost a year.

‘The bond is primarily for procreational purposes. Until you were capable of bearing children, it remained dormant.’

‘But it still needed a catalyst.’

‘Yes. I had little interaction with you during your fourth year, so it did not happen then. I also had relatively little contact with you until the end of your fifth year, when I started giving you detentions for helping Longbottom. I trust he has dropped the subject?’ he asked suddenly.

‘Yes.’

‘Good. Helping him cheat did him no favors.’

Her flash of indignation went unvoiced, and he chose to ignore it. ‘When you broke your head open, I healed you, and that formed the basis for the magical bond. It was the first time I ever used magic directly on you – another reason that attempting to protect the three of you in the Shrieking Shack would likely not have provided the necessary circumstances. All of my magic then was focused outward, away from the three of you. When I healed you, I poured magic into you.’

‘That makes sense. It was after that detention that my body started to react to things, like you being tortured.’ She shivered, and his fingers folded convulsively around her shoulders.

‘I cannot-’ he started haltingly.

‘Don’t. It’s not your fault.’ Her mood darkened. ‘But I’ll kill Lucius if I ever get the chance.’

‘You’ll have to join the queue,’ Snape remarked dryly. ‘Both Les and I have prior claim.’

‘Les?’

‘Rodolphus Lestrangle.’

‘You were friends with him in school.’ He tilted his head in acknowledgement, his chin resting on her head.

‘I was. How did you know that?’

‘Sirius named all your friends in fourth year. We were trying to figure out whether you were a Death Eater.’

‘Of course. Your noses once again where they most certainly did not belong. And? What was the verdict?’

‘Harry and Ron wanted to believe you were. I didn’t think so, and actually, neither did Sirius. He said he couldn’t imagine Dumbledore hiring you if you’d ever worked for the Dark Lord.’

‘Interesting. It’s quite uncommon for Potter and Weasley to be correct when you are not. Almost as rare as the mongrel thinking that I might be on the side of the Light. However, Les and my youth are not the subjects at hand.’ His tone remained neutral, but there was an underlying warning in his mind that told her this part of the conversation was at an end.

‘Yes. The bond.’

‘After establishing the connection, however, the bond grew very quickly, attaching and attracting us closer together all the time. By the end of the summer, it was difficult. By Halloween, it had become unbearable.’

‘So we...consummated...it,’ she added shyly.

‘Yes.’ Again his voice was neutral, but nervousness edged into the back of her mind. In so many ways and in so many things he was far more advanced than she. But when it came to this, it was almost easy to imagine he was another stumbling schoolboy, as awkward around her as Ron was around Lavender and Harry had been around Cho.

‘And then, roughly two weeks into November, we used our magic instinctively to contain Longbottom’s disaster. Were you tired afterwards?’ he asked suddenly.

‘Like I’d run a marathon.’

‘I surmised as much. Each time we have had sex, the ultimate expression and purpose of this magic is fulfilled, and the power grows. I believe it’s like building a dam, and love-making adds more water to what the dam already holds. In a moment of need, like Longbottom’s accident – which should have destroyed the entire classroom and killed at least half of us – the power emerges to protect us, and our elements collide not in sex, but in protection. A different kind of fulfillment. We didn’t have to sleep together for five days after the incident in the classroom. We have never gone so long before or since. I think that we could do that because fire, water, air and earth unified in another way.’

‘So now, we have more power stored up though, because we haven’t had a repeat use – or do we always have that much magic?’

‘No. After an outburst like the one in class, the extra build-up is gone. It’s one of the reasons you were exhausted.’

She was quiet for a minute before murmuring, ‘Fascinating.’

‘I would offer you the materials from the Ang’guin Weyr scholars so that you could form your own opinion, but I doubt the Headmaster would let them out of his office, and I dare not ask permission for you to read them with me in there.’

‘I believe you. Extra power. If a child is what is important, it makes sense the bond would carry an inbuilt protection clause.’ Remembering her promise to Harry and Ron, she asked, ‘Could we use it against the Dark Lord?’

His eyebrows slanted together as he considered it, and then slowly shook his head. ‘It is highly effective, but unreliable. There would be no way to plan it. I’m not even sure it’s controllable.’ He scowled. It was his total lack of control that worried him the most. Accustomed to keeping even his basest instincts reined firmly to his will, the whole

event had happened before he could think about it. His brain caught up to his body in time to understand that he and his lover had made a grave mistake. His silver tongue had saved them from the worst kind of gossip, but an event like that in front of the Dark Lord could prove easily fatal.

‘I suppose that’s true,’ Hermione remarked, a frown blossoming on her face. His scowl deepened.

‘It is impolite to listen to another’s thoughts.’

‘You were thinking loudly.’ She snorted. “‘Impolite?’ You listen to mine all the time.’

‘Granger, you always think loudly.’

‘I do not.’

‘You do everything loudly.’

She sat back against him again, but her elements were rustling impatiently, bored with talk. She reached one hand up idly to bring his mouth down to hers, ‘Everything?’ she murmured, kissing him.

‘Mmmm. Yes. *Everything.*’

As he flipped her over to lie on top of him, her light weight settling on his stirring groin, he heard her mutter the contraceptive charm she had been using before carefully laying her wand aside.

Gritting his teeth – his lord could never know that he had allowed her to use it for almost a month – he wandlessly, wordlessly counteracted it for the first time.

## An Order Obeyed

‘Severus?’

Snape lifted his head from his chair by the fire, the book on his lap half-closed. It was rare for anyone to disturb him in the staff room so late, especially his long-time associate and wife of the Headmaster.

‘Minerva.’ He twisted to look at her, and frowned, sympathy striking at her worn appearance. One of the most formidable witches of the age, a woman not to be crossed by anyone – whether they were an erring first year or the Minister of Magic himself – seemed as pale and thin as Granger, and appeared almost...was she nervous?

He blinked. He had seen many sides of Hogwarts’ resident mother lion, but nervousness was not one of them. ‘Minerva?’ he asked quietly, his voice taking on a gentleness that no student had ever heard. ‘Are you all right?’

She started to nod sharply, trying to bring herself back together, and finally pursed her lips and shook her head. ‘No,’ she replied, and her sigh was shakier than she would have wished. ‘Severus. I came – I need to know – what Albus is doing.’

His gut clenched. So. The Headmaster had not seen fit to tell his wife. He made a mental note to strongly advise his employer that he confide in Minerva at once. It was clearly consuming her alive, and they could definitely use her assistance.

‘What do you mean?’ he asked her, face passive as he gestured for her to sit across from him. She threw him an irritated glance as she sat.

‘Don’t pretend with me, Severus Snape. I know you know. None of your spy faces. What is he up to? It must be exceptionally dangerous, or else I would know. What are his plans and why-’ here she swallowed painfully, ‘-why won’t he say?’

‘As to why he won’t say, that I cannot tell you,’ Snape started with the easier question first, trying to think past his initial, mind-numbing thoughts. Minerva didn’t know. Granger wasn’t to know. When



Dumbledore died, his connection to the Order would be irrevocably lost. He had thought there would be a provision, that Minerva would bear news of his – not innocence, but not murder – to the others.

‘As to his plans?’

‘You know I am bound by oath not to speak of them.’

‘Severus!’ she snapped, rising.

‘I am not free to make this decision,’ he kept his voice purposefully quiet. ‘You know better than most the terms of my service to the Headmaster.’

She stalked away furiously, whirling in a swirl of red to glower at him from the other end of the room, her form mostly in shadow. ‘He’s going to die.’ She said it with such certainty that he wondered if the Headmaster had, in fact, told her, and she was testing him, but her dark eyes held that glimmer of hope, begging him to contradict her.

Snape tilted his head to one side. ‘There is no reason to believe that.’

‘Yes. There is. The ring this summer, you could not cure what it did to him. Mungo’s had no luck. A dozen physicians that I had come from all over the world with exotic ingredients from all seven continents could not change it at all. He is going to die. It’s killing him, leeching his magic one increment at a time.’

That Snape could not deny. He hadn’t known that they had brought in specialists from other nations, but he found it unsurprising that nothing had worked. The Dark Lord enjoyed torturing his victims. Up close and personal was the preferred way, but from a distance through an old curse was also acceptable. And through Dumbledore, the Dark Lord reached not only the Headmaster and Minerva, but all of Hogwarts and the Order.

He could not reply. He could not confirm and would not deny what she was beginning to piece together.

‘Damn you, answer me!’ she spat at him. He raised one dark eyebrow.

‘What do you expect me to say?’

Her shoulders slumped suddenly, curling into her chest, her head bowed. Even her robes seemed to lack the luster of a few moments ago. She looked beaten, and he could hear her defeat in her voice, so unlike the strong woman he had known for almost his entire life.

‘Lie to me?’

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again there was more compassion in the black than Minerva had ever seen. ‘I cannot.’

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Christmas drew ever closer, and Snape was sure he’d never had to balance quite so many different lies all at once, and from three people with which he shared at least one vital secret apiece. Until two years ago, his life had consisted of grading student papers and impatiently waiting until the absence of said students allowed him to sit comfortably and read the Potions and Defense Journals that he had fallen behind on during the course of a term.

But now Voldemort wanted results, both from Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger, and was displeased that it was taking so long to accomplish either, never mind that Draco was unfit to accomplish his task and Snape had only been sleeping with the girl for six weeks.

Draco himself was impossible, refusing to speak to him of his plans and attempts – what had possessed the boy to try a cursed necklace sent through a student? The day that Filch had come hurtling into his office carrying the dangerous item at the request of Minerva McGonagall was still quite fresh in his memory, as was his desperate rush to the hospital wing to keep the potent curse from completely consuming the body of Katie Bell. And though Snape had sent repeated notes requesting that the boy come to his office, so far they had yielded no results. He ground his teeth. It was harder and harder not to hate the boy as he grew up to look exactly like his father, but Dumbledore claimed, and Snape knew he was correct, that while Draco might be the spitting image of Lucius physically, he didn’t have the necessary hardness of heart for killing. So he continued to try to guide Draco differently.

Nevertheless, Dumbledore needed him to keep an eye on Potter in addition to Draco, along with poking Voldemort with subtle questions to get clues regarding the whereabouts and nature of the Horcruxes. As the two boys shot apart like magnets of the same polarity, that would have been a full job in and of itself, without research, classes, the Death Eaters and Hermione Granger.

The girl...it was best not to think too much about her. The burn in his chest when he saw her or remembered her unrestrained smile was a side-effect that he could not explain away as either lust or simply the bond. But there were lines he could not cross. He furrowed his brow. She was slated to go home for the holidays, and if she wasn't pregnant by then he didn't know how they would manage. He could Apparate to see her, he supposed. In the middle of the night. *That* would be charmingly tasteless, but he doubted the bond would allow a two-week separation.

And to top it all off, Minerva had not given up accosting him at odd hours, hopeful that catching him off balance would clue her in to the Headmaster's plans. But he had done all he could on that front. Dumbledore had blinked in surprise upon learning that his wife had gone to the vitriolic younger wizard about him, but he had refused point-blank to tell her anything. At least now Snape knew why. Dumbledore was right, if Minerva knew, she would do everything within her considerable power to prevent it, and would probably succeed.

He sighed as he scrawled an 'A' across one Ravenclaw's essay and shoved it into the 'graded' pile on his desk. He also had to attend this party being thrown by Slughorn. Apparently all the teachers were going and Dumbledore wanted him to attend. *'Add a little fun to your life, my boy,'* the Headmaster had said. Fun would be reading in his study, perhaps with Granger in there as well to talk to-

He halted that line of thought. Talking to her had never been part of the Dark Lord's plan. She was merely the vessel for a witch or wizard that would be greater than both of them. Her smiling, vibrant face darted to the front of his mind and he shoved the persistent image away again. She would be broken for a time when he did what he had to. But better broken for that than for what would follow.

Harry was staring out the window towards the lake, watching the moon ripple on water disturbed by the wind. He felt rather than heard someone behind him, and instinctively, his hand reached to clench on his wand.

'Cursing everything that moves now, Harry?' The dry voice of Ginny Weasley halted his movement and he shrugged.

'Constant vigilance,' he quoted Moody, releasing the wood.

'It's the Gryffindor common room,' she pointed out, drawing level with him at the window and joining his staring out the diamond-cut panes.

'Has Hermione told you anything?' he asked.

'I didn't come to talk about Hermione.' Her voice was sharper than she might have wished, but there had been a time that Harry Potter had wanted to talk to her about other things than Hermione Granger... A long silence garnered no response, so she forayed into a conversation that they had been thoroughly avoiding since the summer. If she was going to be Harry's informant, instead of his girlfriend, it was time to figure that out.

'Going to Slughorn's party?' she asked.

'Yeah,' came the non-committal response.

'Taking someone?'

Harry contained the sigh that blew to his lips, swallowing it instead and trying to think of the proper way to say what he wanted to. But there was no such way, hence his silence for the past months. The thought of causing her pain hurt. But the fear of losing her tightened unbearably in his chest every time he looked at her.

'Ginny...' he hesitated, mouth suddenly dry, but her brown eyes were hard as she glanced at him and he knew she was going to make him out voice to the thoughts that had gradually shoved between them, a wedge struck too many times with a slow, heavy hammer.

'I can't,' he finally managed. 'Ginny, I can't add another person to his list. Especially not you. Not with Ron already on it.'

'He knows who I am. Have you forgotten the diary? That he possessed me when I was eleven years old?'

'Never. But I can also never forget the whiteness of your mother's face when I brought you into Professor McGonagall's office after pulling you out of the chamber, her complete terror when she thought she'd lost you, and her gratitude that she had not. I am petrified, every day, that I will bring that expression of hopeless loss to your mother's face again when Voldemort kills one of her children for the sole purpose of getting to me.

'The only person he has come after severely since before he came back is me. And even with the diary, it was me he wanted. You were the tool then.' He took a deep breath, and the young witch was surprised to see his shoulders shudder. 'Do you have any idea what it would do to me to see you used as that kind of tool now? Or as he used Sirius?'

He finally turned to face her fully, and she was surprised to see tears clarifying the green in his eyes, glossing them to startling brightness. 'Sirius *died* because Voldemort knew he could use Sirius to get to me. He killed my parents simply because they were in the way. Cedric Diggory was murdered because he stood alongside me in the Triwizard Tournament. All of my family is gone. You, Ron, Hermione, Dumbledore and Hagrid are all I have left. And he can't have any more of you. I won't let him.'

He reached up to touch her face, and a bitter smile curved his mouth, a younger echo of a smile that she had seen on rare occasions in the dungeon where Snape had taught Potions. 'I have to let you go, Ginny.'

She stepped backwards as his fingers brushed her cheek, eyes blazing. 'You can push me away, Harry Potter. Merlin knows you've kept enough secrets from me – from all of us - this year to last a lifetime. But this is my world and my fight. And if you think I'm going to fade into the background and let you battle it on your own, you don't know me at all.'

'Hermione's going to the party with McLaggen?' Ron ran his fingers through his hair in what Lavender was coming to recognize as his expression of bewildered frustration. 'Why? She can't possibly *like* a dolt like that?'

Lavender shrugged. 'Ginny and I saw her ask him to the party at breakfast a few days ago. I can hardly believe it myself.' She tilted her head and asked, 'Was Krum smart?'

Ron blew a sigh and lifted his shoulders. 'Dunno. Guess I never tried to figure it out, really, I was too angry that he'd only taken a few months to say what I'd been trying to get the nerve to do for two years. But I think...I think he was pretty smart. Spoke two languages, at least.'

'Funny that she goes for Quidditch players.'

'Yeah. She's never cared too much for the sport, really,' Ron puzzled, frowning suddenly. How many times had he and Harry simply had to roll their eyes at her ignorance regarding their favorite pastime?

'Unless...'Lavender tapped her lower lip with one slender finger. 'Unless she's hiding something, and using McLaggen to cover it up.'

'That sounds much more likely,' Ron admitted. 'Hermione's clever like that.'

'But what?' Lavender asked.

Ron frowned. There was a time, not too long ago, that Hermione had kept no secrets... 'I don't know,' he said again, and felt something like a knife twist painfully between his ribs.

'We should ask Harry to keep a lookout at Slughorn's party,' Lavender suggested. 'She might give herself away.'

Harry stepped into Slughorn's office after Luna, squinting through the vast quantities of smoke that filled the room. He was almost immediately scooped up by Slughorn, who introduced him to a biographer whom he couldn't have cared less about. Slightly more interesting was his vampire friend – whose side were they on? – he made a mental note to ask Dumbledore – and Harry disentangled himself as quickly as he could politely do so. As he turned swiftly, he caught sight of the bushy head that he had been searching for to begin with. Remembering Ron's strange instructions, he called her name.

'Hermione! *Hermione!*

'Harry! There you are, thank goodness! Hi, Luna!'

'What happened to you?' Harry asked, examining her with one eyebrow arched. Hermione grimaced, thinking that she had paid a high price indeed to throw Ginny off her trail, wishing devoutly that she could snag Snape and have a decent conversation that evening instead of trailing around with Cormac. But a disguise was a disguise.

'Oh, I've just escaped – I mean, I've just left Cormac. Under the mistletoe,' she supplied when Harry cocked his head at her quizzically. He nearly snorted. Well, at least Ron was right about that. It appeared she no more fancied McLaggen than the giant squid. So he was probably right about the other...what was she using him for?

'Why'd you come with him if you don't like him?' Luna asked.

'Erm...I thought maybe I would like him better on further acquaintance?' Hermione made up on the spot. This time, Harry did not contain his snort of disbelief. But she had apparently spied McLaggen coming towards them, and was hastily vanishing again. He was about to go after her, but Luna's misty voice stopped him.

'She's very distracted this year. Something about Professor Snape, I think,' she remarked. Harry almost spat out his butterbeer. He and Ron had not been able to work out more than that in a whole term of prying and questions. How did Luna know? He asked her as much.

‘Oh, sometimes they look at each other in the Great Hall,’ was all she replied. ‘And it’s very difficult to tell what she’s thinking.’

At that moment they ran into Professor Trelawny, and Luna started speaking to her so that Harry didn’t have any time to ask further questions, but his green eyes sought Hermione and found her for an instant. She looked exhausted, even with make-up and her hair up. Her eyes scanned the room constantly, and occasionally would alight places for several moments. Once, it was Snape she was watching, but there were others she focused on as well, Blaise Zabini amongst them. He resolved to ask Luna further questions in a more private arena.

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Escaping from McLaggen for the rest of the evening was proving a chore, and one Hermione heartily wished she did not have to perform. But to approach Snape in so public a setting was unthinkable...

‘Hermione Granger! Allow me to introduce you to a friend of mine!’ Slughorn whisked her to the side of a young-ish man, perhaps eight years her senior, who smiled at her tentatively and stuck out his hand.

‘Healer Augustus Pye,’ he said, shaking her hand.

‘Hermione Granger.’

‘Miss Granger here would make an excellent Healer,’ Slughorn told the young man. ‘Not quite as dab a hand at brewing potions as young Harry Potter, but nearly as talented!’ Hermione ground her teeth. Harry was only better because of that stupid book...although his consistent success, and the fact that Snape clearly knew a spell listed in it, was beginning to intrigue her. Perhaps she should start using the tips it included.

‘She’s in sixth year, charming young lady, as you can see,’ Slughorn was continuing. Healer Pye’s expression had changed. He was giving her a very curious look.



‘Professor Slughorn has never recommended a wrong candidate,’ he told her with a small smile. ‘Are you interested in being a Healer, Miss Granger?’

‘I...’ she stammered. After focusing intensely on Career Advice the previous year, her summer and this past fall had driven her future plans from her mind. The battles were getting steadily worse and after both the Ministry debacle and her near-death in Diagon Alley she had come to the sharp understanding that her life was not guaranteed as an outcome of the war. ‘I haven’t given it much thought,’ she finally managed lamely. ‘I mean, with the war, no one really knows what’s going to happen...’

‘Most people survived it the last time,’ he told her in what was clearly meant to be a comforting tone. She could not help the bitter smile that twitched the corner of her mouth. *Most people were not the best friends of Harry Potter. And Snape...* ‘Like I said, he’s never wrong,’ Pye repeated as Slughorn vanished into the crowd. ‘We would happily consider an application from you when you have given your career some consideration – you’re a seventh year?’

‘Sixth actually,’ she replied with some distraction. A sharp flare of concern from Snape’s mind had just caught her own and she was trying to listen to him and Pye at the same time.

She felt Snape’s worry spike and whirled from facing Pye to see him standing next to Draco Malfoy, who had most certainly not received an invitation.

‘I’d like a word with you, Draco,’ Snape was saying quietly, gesturing with one hand for the two of them to leave the room.

‘Oh, now, Severus, it’s Christmas, don’t be too hard-’ Slughorn started to protest

‘I’m his Head of House and I shall decide how hard, or otherwise, to be,’ Snape cut him off sharply, glowering down his nose at the blond. What had possessed Draco? The boy was under great pressure, but he had a safety net and he should be thinking his plans through, which he clearly had not. Their lord would not be pleased if Hogwarts closed due to a series of Draco-caused freak accidents. ‘Follow me,

Draco.' Hermione watched the black and almost-white heads disappear together towards the entrance and debated the merits of following them. Snape silently ordered her to remain at the party. For an instant, she thought she might follow him simply to show him that she was unwilling to take orders given without reason. He didn't begin to share the details of his life with her, but Harry had been on and on about Malfoy being involved with the Death Eaters, and the suspicion echoing from Snape's mind made her think that Harry might have something to that theory after all...

'I'll be back in a bit, Luna – er – bathroom,' she heard Harry say. She took two steps towards him, stopped. He was going after them, and would tell her and Ron tomorrow. She would get what information she could a different way. And she was talking to Pye. She couldn't just vanish. That had all the subtlety of an Unforgivable.

'What was that?' he asked politely.

'Sorry, just...a friend of mine that wasn't invited,' she lied quickly. 'I hope he's not in too much trouble.'

'Professor Snape was the devil to have when I was here, and by all accounts he hasn't changed,' Pye said, grimacing in sympathy. 'The boy will probably have a detention.'

*Malfoy? From Snape? Not unless hell froze today,* Hermione thought. But she did not voice this and instead painted a smile on her face and asked the Healer, 'So, what is it like to work in Saint Mungo's?'

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'Snape was offering to help him?' Ron repeated, staring into the fire and shaking his head slowly. 'I can't believe it. How can Dumbledore trust him? We *know* he's a Death Eater.'

'You're sure Hermione went to bed?' Harry asked for the seventeenth time.

'She has to have. I was...out for a walk,' he said, and shot Harry a half-defiant glance, daring him to challenge the story. Harry merely stared back him, not caring one way or the other what Ron had been

engaged in doing or with whom. 'When I got back she wasn't here. It's almost eleven. She has to be in bed.'

Not for the first time, Harry cursed the founders' spell that allowed Hermione to come bursting into their dormitory at any hour while they could not so much as mount the staircase to hers. He needed her brains for this one. How could they catch them out? Malfoy *and* Snape?

His chest burned with a need to do something, anything, to halt them. But his hatred for the older wizard was well known, which meant that members of the Order were likely to defend the professor, insisting that it was just Harry's wish to see Snape imprisoned that made him see the worst in him all the time...

But the older wizard's defense of him over the past years did not exonerate him in Harry's view. Peter Pettigrew had, after all, slept in his dormitory for three years without touching him, when it would have been easiest to kill him. Snape was far cleverer than Pettigrew, and Voldemort's return coupled with the month spent in the Riddle house had proven that the fastest solution was not always the one the Dark Lord was seeking, as he was more than willing to trade time for increased power. He was very patient, and there was no reason to believe that Snape would not be the same way, biding him time, waiting for exactly the right moment...

Hands twisted round his wand in his lap. Why did Dumbledore trust him? What was so ironclad about their relationship?

'I'm going to tell your dad about it,' he said finally, rising to pace.

'Don't expect him to believe you,' Ron cautioned.

Harry blew a frustrated sigh. 'I can't just sit here and do nothing!'

'I think you should tell him,' Ron hastily added. 'I'm just saying...Dad trusts Snape. 'Cause Dumbledore does.'

'Dumbledore.' The word spat out bitterer than Harry had expected. His respect for the headmaster was great, and still growing with their private lessons, but the awe with which he had viewed him at age

eleven had long since been tempered by the understanding that Dumbledore was only human, and in spite of his vast knowledge, kindness and patience, made mistakes. And on the subject of Hogwarts' youngest professor they had always differed, especially after Sirius had died...

Harry strode towards the staircase. 'I'm telling Hermione tomorrow morning. She'll have some ideas about what to do, some spells...maybe we could slip them both Veritiserum...'

'Don't joke about that,' Ron warned, climbing wearily to his feet. 'The Ministry would flay you alive.'

They climbed the stairs in silence, and Harry sat on his bed for a long time after Ron's gentle snores told him his best friend was asleep. Loneliness wrapped itself around the young hero, a shroud he was growing all-to-familiar with. He had turned Ginny away for the final time, and in spite of her speech about being part of the battle, he had no intention of allowing her to be there, and he knew that Mrs. Weasley would be his ally in his efforts there. After the war, if he survived the war, he would gladly beg her forgiveness on his knees, but until then...his stomach roiled at the remembrance of her sculpture-white face in the Chamber of Secrets...

Hermione had vanished from the party, as usual, leaving him bereft of the well-thought-out advice he had come to rely on over the past five years. He frowned. Even though Ron had told him to watch for it specifically, Harry had forgotten to tell him about Luna's strange observation about Hermione and Snape. Another project for coming back from term – perhaps Hermione had learned something about Snape over the summer that could help them figure out what he and Malfoy were up to...

And Ron was still on the fence about Snape, even though he seemed to be convinced about Malfoy now. The *Daily Prophet* wasn't the only tarnish on Harry's reputation. The Department of Mysteries fiasco, where Voldemort had tricked him using the dreams that he was supposed to be learning to block, was what had Hermione and Ron and probably the rest of the Order second-guessing him.

He finally lay down as his eyelids grew heavy from watching the stars flicker outside his window and thought with some amount of grim satisfaction that at least until after the holidays, Snape and Malfoy were unlikely to be able to do anything, which would given him a whole two weeks to convince the rest of the Order that something had to be done.

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Snape woke early, and rolled over, squinting in an uncomfortable, foreign brightness. As his back arched, his fingers collided with material as foreign as the light and his eyes snapped fully open, all sleepiness vanished, his wand zooming to his hand as he Summoned it wordlessly.

The swiftness with which he had sat up brought his free hand in contact with something else as he stared out windows high on the wall where sunlight streamed through them. His fingers tangled in something soft and wavy...

He looked down, and felt his heart skip.

Still fast asleep, right by his side, was Hermione Granger, one hand tucked under her cheek, her masses of curls spread out behind her head and over her shoulder and one exposed breast. The early morning light was not quite yet touching her face.

Entranced, he reached one long finger out to trace her cheekbone, dragging down to her ear and circling it delicately before skimming over her long eyelashes and drifting over her small nose.

He dimly recalled gathering her into his arms as they fell asleep, the first time they had ever done so. He thought that the Room of Requirement was really quite remarkable – Unplottable, completely impossible to find when in use. It had been quite a nice change to make love in a real bed. He could not possibly allow her access to his rooms and her dormitory was a public place.

He watched her chest rise and fall slowly with her steady breathing, and touched her neck where her soothing heartbeat throbbed under his fingers. He sat for a long while as the sun gradually gained

intensity, hardly daring to move lest he wake her, the expression on his features completely unguarded as he gazed at her face. The old magic that suffused his body was sated and calm, lazy spirals of air and fire drifting towards her body to caress her.

For a blinding moment, he felt the weight of his life and his decisions through all that he was denied with the girl next to him. He wished he could take her walking through the rose hedges carefully maintained by Dumbledore, or the staff garden with its numerous useful plants. That they could order breakfast from the house elves and eat it here. That they could spend days in his laboratory working together exploring each other's minds as well as their bodies. That he could smile at her without the knowledge of the pain he was going to cause her. That he could love her without a guilt so consuming that sometimes he could feel it eating its way through him.

But he had made a different choice in the years before she was born, and nothing now could remove the stain. *'Spots that never come off.'* A truer word the imposter had never spoken.

Next to him, she began to stir. He picked up his wand from the bedside table where he had laid it down, and halted. He did not want to know. He did not want to see.

But her heart had quickened, and so had her breathing. She was rousing. He had to do it now, or not at all.

A pattern in the air with his wand was accompanied by a silence command over her abdomen. He hoped that like every other day he had cast this spell, nothing would materialize, that it would reveal her womb still without fruit.

But today, it coalesced into a silver blob in midair, rotating slowly over her belly, shining in the morning sunlight - a formless cluster, like the life so newly created within her - and his heart clenched.

As simple and sudden as that. What they had started nine months ago in his storeroom was over.

He had done as his master had ordered.

Tears blinded him as he rose, summoning his clothes and slipping from the room before she finished waking.

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Snape had never looked at the forbidding, disused old Riddle house with as much dread as pounded through him now. He could feel his heartbeat beneath his ribs, in his feet, in his thumbs as he stared for a moment at the grim building, nerving himself to do what was necessary for himself and the girl.

*The only way. She has to stay alive. Potter will never finish the task without her.* If he didn't have the guts to do it now, he would never do it later. One chance to save her, whatever the price...

...he was climbing the hill, snow crunching under his feet as he made the ascent without the permission of his brain, his body once again on automatic where his mind and, this time, his heart might interfere. The knowledge of her sure hatred almost stopped him where he stood, colder than the wind that knifed through his heavy cloak, but as usual, his limbs pressed onward. Even when he doubted himself, he could always act.

In the creaking door, up the darkened stairs, to the end of the hall and the Dark Lord's newly-created receiving chamber. He rapped sharply on the wooden door as he drew level with it, announcing his presence.

'Come, Severus.' His lord's back was to him as he entered, but Snape did not have to ask how he knew it was him. The Dark Lord's hearing was the only Snape knew of that was better than his own.

'My lord,' Snape bowed to the black-robed figure and stepped back a respectful pace as he rose. The lord tilted his head and sniffed, as if seeking a scent on the air.

'You smell of urgency. What has happened?' Voldemort asked quietly. Snape opened his mouth and shut it again as a pale hand indicated that the lord was not finished. 'I hope for your sake that you bring me good news, Severus, instead of telling me that I must be patient. Has young Malfoy come closer to his goal?'

Snape shook his head. 'I am afraid that he is quite resistant to...ah...accepting my advice. Seems determined that I want nothing more than to accomplish the job myself and steal his glory.' *I don't need to press him for that*, he thought despairingly. *He won't be able to do it himself.*

'Then, the girl?' Voldemort hinted, his tone making it clear that there had better be some real news on this front.

'Yes, my lord, the girl,' Snape replied carefully. His mind was shuttered and drawn. 'I sent the message as soon as I could. She is pregnant. I tested her this morning.'

'Does she know?' Voldemort asked, amusement flickering to life in his voice.

'No.' It took effort to keep the self-loathing out of his voice. He was certain he had heard her sleepily call his name as the door had closed on his heels. 'I don't think she will for several weeks yet.'

'Fascinating.' An ironic gleam. 'Congratulations, Severus. You're going to be a father.'

Snape winced. He had been trying so hard not to think of what happened at the end of a pregnancy-

'I know, quite disgusting, isn't it, to have your only child by a Mudblood? However... it has its uses. Do not be ashamed to follow my orders, Severus.'

'Of course not, my lord,' Snape inclined his head, grateful that the lord had misinterpreted his flinch. He waited a deliberate amount of time before asking quietly.

'My lord, do you wish me to maintain close contact with the...the Mudblood...or shall I be done with her?'

Voldemort gave him a penetrating glare, his red eyes gleaming. 'You are done with her. Let her stay at the school – the old man will provide her with everything she needs for as long as he lives, and the nurse there is more than competent to see her safely through bearing



the child. You need have nothing to do with it until the child is born, when you will bring it to me.'

'Of course.'

'Excellent.' The long hand flipped again in an elegant turn.  
'Dismissed.'

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*Finis Act One*

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A/N: So, as you will notice, this is the final chapter of Forbidden Fruit. I am well aware that the story is as of yet, unfinished, as there are too many questions left as to the events that have taken place and the reason for them. However, the sequel, which I have named Paradise Lost, is returning to a slightly different format and also jumps several weeks ahead, so I decided on this as a logical stopping place with her just getting pregnant. I called it act one in part because it is better to think of Forbidden Fruit as the first of two acts in a completed tale. Many of you have raised excellent questions that have helped shape my storyline for Paradise Lost, and for that, as well as reading this story, I thank you very much!